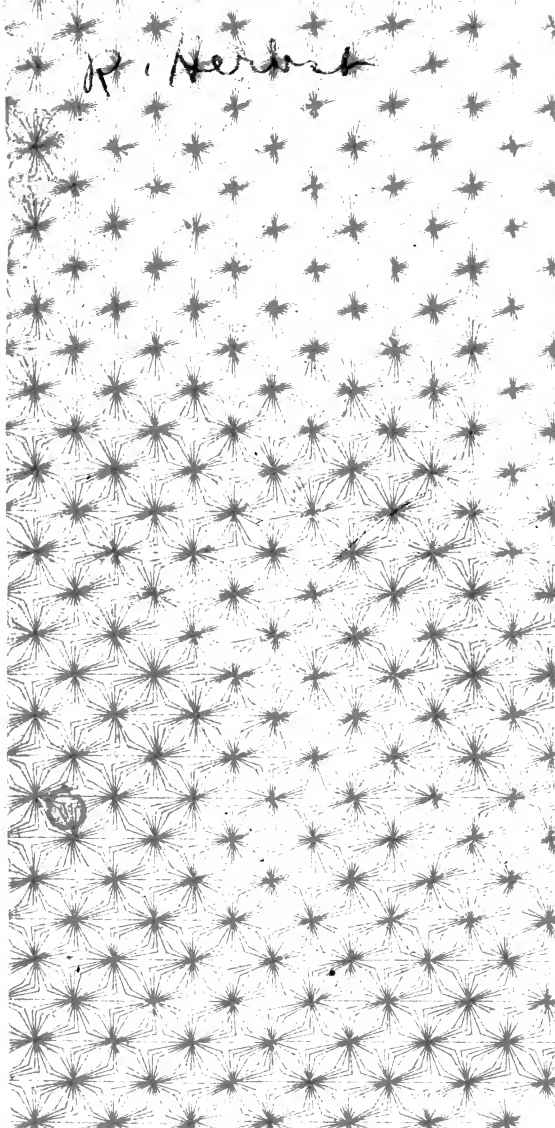


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IN THE DAYS OF  
**Chaucer**

*By*

TUDOR JENKS

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*Tam*

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE

ILLUSTRATED



*New York*

A. S. BARNES & COMPANY

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# INTRODUCTION

BY HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE

ONE of the most interesting facts about Chaucer is that when we think of him we instantly see about him a group of men and women ; like Shakespeare, he stands out-of-doors with all kinds of people in his company. When we read Spenser, we are in fairy-land, and when we read Bacon we are in a library ; but when we read the Canterbury Tales, we are on our way from the Tabard Inn to the old cathedral town, with a group of very entertaining pilgrims. Chaucer must have been one of the most interesting men of his time. It is true that immensely entertaining books are sometimes written by men who talk in the

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most prosy way and have no gifts as story-tellers ; but Chaucer was so much a man of his time, knew so many kinds of people, was so much alive to everything that went on about him, had such a fund of humor, and was so full of gayety, that it is impossible to think of him as other than a delightful companion, to spend the day with whom one would have walked a long way.

Chaucer was a scholar in his way ; he knew Latin, French, and Italian as well as English books, and was fond of study and reading ; but he liked best of all the English men and women with whom he lived ; he liked to hear them talk, to know how they amused themselves, what they thought about, and how they dressed. He lived on the edge of the Court circle, but he was at home with all kinds of people, because, like Shakespeare, he liked

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all kinds of people. It was a hard time in which he lived in many ways: manners were rude, talk was often very coarse, there were practically none of the conveniences and there was very little of the refinement of modern life; but there was a great deal of vigorous and manly character, a great deal of honest and homely living; and the age was much more picturesquely dressed than our more colorless time. Each occupation, trade, profession, and rank in society had its own dress, and there was, therefore, great and often brilliant variety. Life was a much more striking show than it is to-day; and if we could recall it we could sit by the hour and watch the procession pass with unflagging interest.

Chaucer was as much interested in the passing of the procession as a boy would have been; in fact, one reason why people have cared so much for what he wrote is

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that there was so much of the boy in him; (such curiosity about things and people, such pleasure in looking at the show of society, such joy in sitting in the sun or by the tavern fire and hearing men describe the things they had seen and done. He tried his hands at various subjects when he began to write, but in the end he found what he could do best because he cared most for it, and he set himself to describe the people of his time. He was not a photographer, exactly reproducing every detail ; nor was he a sketcher, putting on paper a few outlines; he was a poet; a man, that is, who sees not only with his eyes but with his imagination and his reason. He saw people precisely as they looked; any photographer could have done that; but he also understood them, which no mere photographer could have done; and he described them so that we



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see them, which was quite beyond the art of the most thoughtful observer.

He became the poet of England in his century, and "The Canterbury Tales" are what the historians call an original source; that is to say, they give first-hand, trustworthy information about the things with which they deal. It is the company of pilgrims going down to Canterbury which comes into view when we open the pages of Chaucer; and these pilgrims stand for all the people of England. Only two or three of them are religious as we think of religion; the rest are very far from being saints; they are the plain, average, hearty, honest, coarse people of their time. They are going to a shrine and they expect to have their sins forgiven; but they have started from a tavern where there are plenty of cakes and ale, and the air of the tavern goes with them.

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If Chaucer had been a saint like those sweet and tender singers George Herbert and John Keble, he would not have liked the company nor would he have stayed in it ; if he had been an idealist like Spenser, he would have escaped from tavern talk and gossip into fairy-land ; fortunately for us, he was a simple-hearted, broad-minded, very human Englishman, with immense relish for all kinds of life, and one of the best portrait painters and most natural and sweet-voiced singers that ever lived. He was a good deal of a realist as well as a dreamer of fair dreams, as all the poets have been since time began ; he was interested in things as they were and in people as he saw them, and he let his imagination play about them and his poetry encircle them as the skylarks rose out of the fields of Kent as the pilgrims rode past on their way to Canterbury.

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Because he was so thoroughly a man of his age, so marvellous a painter of its manners and its men, Chaucer, more than most poets, must be seen in the dress he wore, in the time in which he lived, and among his people. Some poets need the aid of commentators to make their phrases and allusions clear to us ; Chaucer needs the aid of the sympathetic student of the fourteenth century in England, who can bring that vanished age once more about the figure of its greatest poet.

This is what Mr. Jenks has done ; he has made us see Chaucer's England, understand its habits, overhear its speech, and comprehend its spirit. The fresh interest with which he has invested his subject and the fulness of knowledge with which he has made the merry, hearty, coarse England of Chaucer's time live before our imaginations shows how intelligently he has

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read and how deeply he loves the poet of "The Canterbury Tales."

There are many aids to the study of poets and of their works in these days, and, in many cases, these aids are so intelligently prepared that they are, for their purpose, worthy of all praise. For the most part, however, these aids deal mainly, often exclusively, with matters presented by the text; with the exact meanings of the words, with references and allusions of all kinds, so that everything appears in clear light except the poet himself. Now the poet is the chief factor in his work, the determining factor. To know him is to bring to his work the secret of its power, of its charm, of its unique quality, whatever that may be. It must never be forgotten, moreover, that the end of all knowledge of books is to freshen and deepen the power to feel the movement of life in

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them, and to enjoy the beauty which that stir of life takes on; in other words, to find delight in the art of the book. These are precisely the ends served by such a portraiture of a man and of his age as Mr. Jenks has made in this study of Chaucer. He has freshened our sense of the humanity of the poet, and he has so recovered the form and dress of a past age, that he has freshened our delight in his work. This series is to be extended to include similar books dealing with Shakespeare, Milton, Scott, and perhaps other writers, and can hardly fail to supplement in a very happy way the many admirable aids to the study of these writers.





## CHAPTER I

WHEN AND WHERE THE BOY LIVED—WHO  
THE CHAUCERS WERE



EOFFREY CHAUCER,  
the earliest of the great  
poets who have written in  
English, and the only  
writer of his time whose  
works are still read by  
others than students of language and lit-  
erature, died in 1400, five centuries ago.

His life was during the childhood of  
England, for we must not forget that  
what we call the "old days" are truly the  
young days, when modern England was in  
its beginning. The life of his time was  
simpler than our own, and in every way  
easier to be understood by those who lived  
in it. Even though it is now a part of

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"history" and studied by scholarly men, we must not think the story of Chaucer's time a matter of dull learning: there were great and serious happenings, of course, but there were also the little every-day incidents, the round of work and play, the bits of talk, the comedies and jests of home, of school, that fill our hours to-day. We see all these in the poems of Chaucer, for he shows us the living England of the fourteenth century, making it pass before our eyes as it passed before his own—good and evil, comic or tragic, the life of high and low, rich and poor, good and bad.

In trying to make the England of Geoffrey Chaucer live again before our minds, we must first be sure to remember how many things were nearly the same. We are to bear it in mind that if we might be carried back to the land and times in which he lived, there would be no lack of surroundings we should find familiar. Out in the country, far from towns and farms,



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there would be little to remind us we had gone back five hundred years from these days of the twentieth century: fields and woods, sea and sky, plants, insects, animals, would be the same or so like all we know that we could see in them no hint of their earlier date.

Closer study would show differences: we should find the sheep smaller, and the oxen, too; for long years of careful breeding have made the farm animals larger. But only when we met inhabitants, when we took part in the life of town, village, or city would we know we had entered upon a different time. We might, on seeing a farm laborer, be struck by the oddity of his dress or by the unusual form of the tools he carried; but until we heard him speak, the man would not seem to us so very different from men of his kind as we see them about us to-day.

An attempt to talk with him, however, would bring out proof that "time works

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wonders." We could not understand the common English of that day until custom had taught us to catch the familiar words in the pronunciation of the time, and to know the grammar of the language when it was less simple.

Beginning thus, by finding the language not quite our own, but more like a foreigner's English, a dialect, we should, as we walked beside the farmer or shepherd to his home, come upon much that would be quite as strange as himself. On our way, we should no doubt take sly glances at his clothing, glances he would not notice, since he would be looking with as much curiosity at what we wore. He would be wearing "hose," trousers and stockings combined; a loosely fitting doublet, or jacket, and a hood or cap of cloth—together a convenient and appropriate dress, and with the addition of a warm cloak, an excellent one for cold weather.

This was the simplest form of the cos-

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tume of the time, but the rich added every sort of adornment they could devise, as Chaucer's poems will show you, for he describes the dress of his characters as if he were poet, artist, and tailor in one.

When we come near a town, we shall find little smoke in the air—there are no factories, no regular chimneys to the houses, and wood is almost the only fuel, though “sea-coal,” as they called it, was in use by brewers and clothiers. Water or wind turns the mills that grind the grain, and most other work is done by hand.

In the towns, we see few shops, and not many tradesmen at work, the blacksmith, the tailor, the joiner, the cobbler—all these must have been kept busy; but the list of crafts is not a long one, and their business was carried on among their neighbors. Streets are narrow, because there is little traffic, and, being near together, the houses are convenient for friendly gossip.

The shopkeeper can talk with his neigh-

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bor over the way, or at either side; in summer, housewives find their doorsteps attractive, and life goes on in the open air. Neighbors are friends or enemies, as it may happen, and, either way, keep the day from being dull.

Supposing that we have made friends with our imaginary guide into the past, we settle down in the village with him, and soon find how little of the outer world comes to these village folk. But what is brought to them has a weight and interest, a living quality not found in printed news. They learn of the outside world from the lips of travellers, from pilgrims, glad to tell the story that wins them a seat by the log-fire, and a place at the table; from the archer who shot many an arrow in the battle he describes; from a friar who can repeat the learned words of the abbots and monks in the abbeys and monasteries; from the carters who have been with harvest wagons to fairs in busy market towns,

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and brought back the gossip of the day. Most exciting of all it is to listen to the mysteries told by credulous and superstitious sailors who have sailed unknown seas.

We find the people divided sharply into ✓ classes, and jealous of their rights and customs—the nobles, the clergy, merchants, farmers, laborers—their sons usually expecting to follow in the father's footsteps, and not only willing but proud to be known by their dress as of this or that vocation.

We find the people all Christians, in name if no more; going to the church services more or less as a matter of course, and yet anything but strait-laced. And we are amazed at the multitude of the folk who depend on the church for a livelihood—men and women, good, bad, or indifferent, and popular or unpopular, loved or hated, according to their lives and works.

For the most part, the people are not oppressed by want, and this partly because their needs are few. The houses are but

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rude huts with scant furnishing; their food comes from their own fields and meadows; their clothing is simple in fashion and sound in texture, lasting many years. Work is not hard to find, since nearly all labor is such as can be done by the unskilled, and because, after the middle of the century, the plague made workers scarce. Amusements are many and within the reach of all, since they find their sport in such games or exercises as now amuse our young folk, or in pageants and processions, of which there is no lack; and during earlier years of the time we are considering there were no threatening signs of the great civil wars that were in the Wars of the Roses to make all England a battlefield for the warfare of her nobles.

Altogether, Chaucer's land was a nation in its first youth. There was enough of variety to make its people interesting to one another—variety in life, in dress, in occupation—and yet the old strife of races

## *Birth and Family*

was at an end, Norman and Saxon were united in a common patriotism, and under a single standard the English had shown their valor on many a noted field, against the French, the Scots, or the Welsh.

England was a nation, a young, healthy, child-like nation, with a child's faults and a child's virtues.

But we do not mean to deal with the larger facts of the times; those are for general histories and for the students. We shall try rather to make you glad to read of Chaucer, the man and the poet, as you might have known him if you had been his friend or neighbor, so that you may come to the reading of his works with the feeling that he was a man of flesh and blood, who loved his books, his countrymen, and his native land. It is the only way to read him aright, for no poet was ever less fitted to be made only a text-book from which to study lessons. Study him we must, if we are to understand the be-

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ginnings of English verse; but the best study of a poet is when we learn to read his work with pleasure. Until we know him and something of the life he led, we cannot feel his charm.

In the first place, we must not imagine that anyone of the time took the trouble to put down for later ages even the briefest account of Chaucer's life. The old writers of chronicles were careful to tell us of battles, of floods, of kings and warriors, but they could not understand that after five centuries we care much more about the poet than about the king or the great barons, and the battles they fought. We do not know certainly even the date of Chaucer's birth. For many years it was believed upon tradition that the date 1328 was once marked on his tombstone in Westminster Abbey. But later scholars think this a mistake, and have decided that the poet must have been born about 1340.

A good reason for accepting the later



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date is this: In the year 1386 there was a trial held in the city of Westminster, and the record shows that Geoffrey Chaucer was one of the witnesses. In the proceedings it is stated that Chaucer is a man of forty years and upward, and has borne arms for twenty-seven years. If this was meant to be taken as at all an exact statement, the very smallest boy in school has only to subtract a little more than forty from 1386, and the remainder will give the date of Chaucer's birth as about 1340.

But the testimony may not have been meant to be more than a proof that the witness was past middle age, just as men nowadays when about to vote will say, "over twenty-one," even if they are forty or more. Indeed, it is known that in the same trial other witnesses made widely wrong statements as to their ages, and also as to the period during which they "bore arms" — statements making them bear arms in infancy. May it not be that

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the old French word "armeez" means "bore a coat-of-arms"? This was the age of heraldry, and even an infant might have a coat-of-arms. "Armeez" has that meaning in the testimony given by Chaucer in this very trial.

If we had no other evidence, we might still be doubtful; but we find that to put his birth at about this time fits in fairly well with the facts of his life, and seems probable in so many ways that it may be accepted until we know more exactly. Thus, if we take the statement that he had borne arms for twenty-seven years in 1386, and reckon back, we shall see that he began military life in 1359, and was then nineteen or a year or two less when he first bore arms—which seems reasonable, especially when we find that it was in 1359 we first hear of Chaucer as a soldier, for we know he was with the army of Edward III during an expedition to France made in that year.

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Besides, there are legal records showing that John Chaucer, the poet's father, was under fourteen in 1324, and unmarried during some part of 1328; so it does not therefore seem likely his son was born in 1328.

Let us then believe, until we know more exactly, that it was some time not long after 1340 that we must think of the arrival of Geoffrey, son of John Chaucer, the vintner of the little city London on the Thames. John Chaucer, the wine-merchant and tavern-keeper, lived not far from the river, and one boundary of his garden was a small brook, called "Wall Brook," the place of which is still to be found on the map of London, since the street "Walbrook," not far from the Cannon Street Station, retains the name of the little water-course that bounded the Chaucer garden.

It was an excellent place for a tavern. London Bridge, then a long stone bridge,

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with a gate-house guarding each end and a chapel in the middle, was, even in the fourteenth century, a busy thoroughfare over which horsemen and footmen were coming and going all day. John Chaucer's tavern was sure of plenty of custom, for in those times whoever was thirsty must drink either ale or small beer—water was not thought at all wholesome. Probably the idea had good foundation, so far as the city water was concerned, for all sources of supply were likely to be polluted by the waste of the town.

We may be sure that the wayfarers over the bridge often turned aside to visit the tavern kept by the Chaucers near Dowgate Hill. From his earliest boyhood the poet is likely to have seen all sorts and conditions of men as they visited the tavern. Probably it was a well-known hostelry, since Geoffrey's grandfather also had been a vintner, and may have kept a tavern in the same house or the same neigh-

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borhood. Back of the grandfather, Robert, we know nothing of the family, though from the name (which seems to be a form of the French word "*chaucier*," meaning "shoemaker" or "stocking-weaver") we may guess that some ancestor was of that trade. The name was not an uncommon one in those times, which makes it not easy to tell which of the many that bore it were related to the poet's family.

## CHAPTER II

HIS BOYHOOD AND EDUCATION AS IT MAY  
HAVE BEEN—HE BECOMES A PAGE IN  
THE ENGLISH COURT

THERE is nothing recorded of Geoffrey's boyhood, and we must imagine it for ourselves by fitting together what we can find out about the lives of boys of that day, remembering that he was the son of a well-to-do citizen of London, then a city of less than 50,000 inhabitants.

Certain things we can take for granted because of his later life. Thus there is no doubt that Chaucer was well educated, for we find him in manhood showing knowledge of all the learning of his time—Latin, French, the sciences, and literature, and this in spite of his passing a busy life in court and in the city. Where he went

## *Education and Youth*

to school we do not know. It may be that he was taught at home by a tutor, some churchman, or in some of the church schools. We know about what he must have studied — languages, grammar and rhetoric, music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, for these were the branches then taught. While we might find much to criticize in the old method of teaching, it is well to remember that from it <sup>or despite</sup> came the training that made the author of the “Canterbury Tales,” and to turn out so finished a product is all that can be expected of any system, no matter how scientific. For him, at least, the system must have been fairly good, since it made him a student all his life, and a lover of learning.

The school-days of an English boy in the Middle Ages were never very pleasant. There was far too much reliance on the rod as a means of education. In his book “Chaucer’s England,” Matthew Browne says: “It is quite bad enough to think of

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their discomfort at a public school in those days. Tumbling out of bed before daylight on frosty mornings; no fire, or, when fire came, a smoky room; long lessons before breakfast; lumps of meat flung to the boys as if they were dogs; long, dreary prayers; no women about the place to give an air of light and tenderness, but only frowsy, dirty monks and other men; then, the dark hole [a prison or cell, used as punishment] and plenty of the rod — it must have been delightful.”

We can imagine that all he says is true, and yet believe it is not a complete, and so not a fair picture. While it applies to the cold and dreary days of winter, there could not be a school without some brightness. Even in the Middle Ages, really good teachers existed to make the best of bad conditions, to give life to the lessons they taught, and to enliven the duller hours of school by their good humor. There were also the usual school-boy tricks, and the lit-



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tle jokes of the class-room, for these things must be wherever young people meet together. In spring and autumn, too, even dingy old halls become bright, and in expecting the pleasures of the playground the hours of study soon pass. It is easy to give a wrong impression of anything by telling only one side of its story.

Once school was out, what a number of games there were for the boys of Chaucer's London! They seem to have had all we play to-day, besides a great number that have been long forgotten. It would take too much space to give even a hasty list of them. We can mention only a few of the more usual ones. Thus, for in-doors and rainy weather, there were cards, chess—which was very generally played, and even taught as a part of fashionable education—dice, “tables,” or backgammon, besides the old tricks we know as amusements of All-hallowe'en, such as “bob-cherry” and the like. Out of doors they

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engaged in leaping, wrestling, casting the stone, and especially archery, the last being thought so important that citizens were required to practise with the bow on all feast days.

Boys had already many sorts of ball-games, the early forms of cricket, hand-ball, foot-ball, trap-ball, golf, and hockey. Besides these games there were, of course, the regular out-door sports, such as swimming, riding, sailing, and in winter there was skating on the Moorfield, north of the city, and at times on the Thames itself, though instead of our dainty and convenient "club skates," that are clamped to the feet in an instant, young Chaucer, if he wished to skate, had to content himself with the thigh-bones of an animal, clumsily tied to his feet—just how, we do not know. It would be interesting to see one of these old skates, of which some specimens have been dug up, and to find out whether there was any edge to them, or

## *Education and Youth*

whether the skater merely shuffled along over the ice, really sliding. The chances are that there was some sort of edge, since an old writer speaks of skaters "going like the wind," which they could hardly have done on the round surface of a bone.

Besides the sports somewhat familiar to us, there were some that imitated old forms of warfare, and so have naturally been given up. Tilting was practised with a stick instead of a lance, and against the "quintain," instead of against a knight. There were many sorts of quintains, but the idea of all was to set up a mark so that if the tilter failed to strike it fairly he would receive a buffet from a stuffed bag, or perhaps be drenched by the upsetting of a tub of water, or would in some other way pay a penalty for his awkwardness.

We may know that these games were really played at the time, for it was necessary to pass a law forbidding boys to play at "Prisoners' Base" at Westminster

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during the sessions of parliament! There is something delightful in the idea of the grave counsellors of Edward III being annoyed by the shouts of the small boys chasing one another about Westminster Hall without the slightest regard for the dignity of the legislators who were making history within.

Besides all these every-day sports there were spectacles to be seen everywhere—pageants, processions of trade-guilds, shows, jugglers, acrobats, strolling musicians, men with trained animals, all the catchpenny contrivances that would serve to tempt a few coins out of the purses that hung heavy from the girdles of the prosperous citizens of England's capital. And each holiday had its form of merry-making,

In order to understand why this was the case, we must remember that in those times there was more leisure to give to such forms of amusement. In the first place,

## *Education and Youth*

there were fewer books to read. The few manuscripts there were in all England were kept mainly in the universities or abbeys. Making copies of them was a long, slow, and costly matter, and there was no public to pay for them. Not all, even among the nobles, could read, as you know; and it was much pleasanter to listen to old ballads sung by minstrels than to spell out dry "Lives of the Saints." Then, too, people had to take their recreation in the daylight, for at night the streets were unlighted (there were no street-lamps in London till 1416), and in-doors the candles or torches were too costly to be much used except in the homes of the great nobles, wealthy churchmen, or merchant princes. Consequently most people kept early hours, and had time for some rest during the long day they secured by early rising.

Not only did they have more time, but more inclination for such amusements.

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

Reading so much less, they thought the more of the real life that went on before their eyes. Where a modern family would stay in-doors with their eyes fixed upon newspapers or books, the same family in the reign of Edward III. would dress themselves in their best and be out in the streets or fields to see and to be seen.

On holidays, the folks of London town took part as actors or spectators in the customary performances of the season. And they kept many more holidays and holy days than have survived to our time. Christmas was rather a season than a day of rejoicing, and its celebration lasted until Twelfth Day, at least, and often till Candlemas, that is, the second of February. The beginning and the end of the year each had its observances. And to these we must add Candlemas itself, Shrovetide, St. Valentine's Day, Palm Sunday, Easter, May Day, Midsummer Eve, Michaelmas, and a number of saints'

## *Education and Youth*

days, to say nothing of every Saturday afternoon and Sunday, for there was no idea until long after Chaucer's lifetime that there was any harm in games or amusements on Sunday, which, except for church-going, was kept as a feast-day.

Without bearing in mind the difference between his life and ours in these respects, it is impossible for us to put ourselves in Chaucer's place and to understand his poems and his career. We must get into our minds a picture of his home.

The tavern of his father stood, as has been said, on the rapid little brook that flowed into the Thames at Dowgate. It was no doubt a plaster or a wooden building, roofed with tiles, having a court in the centre, around which was the tavern, with galleries. On the ground floor were the public rooms, furnished with a few rude tables and benches or stools, while upstairs, reached from the court in the centre, were the rooms for the lodgers and

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the family. Being in so public a thoroughfare, it was probably a busy place, with the coming and going of the guests, the running to and fro of the maids and the grooms, the passing of serving-men, and the babel of loud talk, in French and the dialects of English.

What better place could there have been for the boy Geoffrey to study the people of his period? To the tavern came the knights and their esquires, the merchants and the prentices, the buyers and sellers of cloth and wool, the courtiers and the monks, the minstrels and jugglers; and all passed before the keen eyes of the boy who was to paint them so vividly for us of five hundred years later.

John Chaucer, the keeper of the tavern, must have been a man of substance and of good repute, for we are told that he had been with King Edward in 1338 upon a visit to Cologne and Antwerp, when the English were forming an alli-



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ance with the Germans against the French. King Edward was bent upon making an impression of wealth and power, and he would not be likely to take with him one who was no more than a mere keeper of a tavern. John Chaucer may have had charge of the king's supplies; but as Geoffrey's mother was also a member of the party, it would seem that the Chaucers were not merely on a business trip. This journey was made but a few years before the birth of the poet, and is important to us only as showing the respectable rank of his parents.

We may note that in all probability the name of Chaucer's mother was Agnes, and that she was the heir and "consanguinea" or relative—perhaps a niece—of Hamo de Compton, a "moneyer," which was, if we may judge by a line in Chaucer's translation of the "Romance of the Rose," either a banker or a money-changer. So she may have been heiress to a man

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who was well-to-do, and may have brought her husband a rich dowry.

But even in London, the richest city of England, we should not expect to find at that period any impressive buildings except the great churches and castles. The houses were in many cases very mean affairs of timber and mortar, for brick and stone were as yet rarely used for private houses. Most of them were of but one story, and only the better class of citizens had added the upper rooms, then known as "solars," a name that is thought to be derived from the Latin "*solarium*," and to have been first given to the flat roof of a house upon which one could sit in the sun, and then to have come to mean any upper story. Access to the solar was usually by an outside stairway.

The shops of this very prosperous city were not at all magnificent, being merely little booths built out in front of the houses, so as to make an open counter, where the

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merchant could display his goods in sight of the passers-by. The counter being protected from the weather only by its roof, it must have been necessary to remove all goods into the house whenever there came more than a gentle shower; and at night all the goods had to be taken in from these booths; and stored away till morning.

The unpaved roads in front of the houses were of course often muddy, and there was little attempt to keep them clear. If you will look at any ordinary country road with its ditches along the sides to carry off the water that runs down from the high part in the middle, you will have a perfect idea of the London street of Chaucer's boyhood; though some of the more travelled streets were beginning to be paved during his later lifetime. To keep their feet out of the mud the people sometimes wore high clogs of wood, but it is probable that in the very wet days most kept in-doors, for the umbrella was

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to be unknown for some centuries. How it did rain at times! There was one year before Chaucer was ten years old when the old chroniclers assure us that it rained almost continuously from midsummer till Christmas. This was in 1349; but at about that time in the world's history there were recorded many unaccountable freaks of nature.

This was the period of the "Black Death," that terrible scourge during which millions of people died of a mysterious and incurable malady. There is no reason why we should recount its horrors, and it will be enough to say that in the city of London alone it is believed to have caused the death of half the inhabitants during the fourteen months of its continuance. That there is hardly a reference to this enormous calamity in the writings of Chaucer, seems to indicate that he is more likely to have been eight years old or less at the time than twenty, as he would have been if

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born, according to the older authorities, in 1328. To a little child the great plague would soon become only a vague memory, ? but a young man of twenty would have been deeply impressed by the terrible scenes he then witnessed.

There is another possible explanation of the absence in Chaucer's works of any trace of the darkest side of the life of the English people. Chaucer was not a poet of the people. He soon became attached to the English court, as we shall see, and passed his young manhood with those whose lives were far from any share in the troubles of the poor and humble. They looked to their poet for literature that would give pleasure to their leisure hours. Naturally, he chose such subjects and such methods of treatment as were most acceptable to his fashionable patrons, and left to others the recording of the sufferings of the poor, the injustice of the powerful, and the shortcomings of the clergy.

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Green, in his "History of the English People," draws a striking contrast between the courtly author of the "Canterbury Tales" and the "gaunt poet of the poor," William Langland, who wrote the "Vision of Piers Plowman." Each poet had his work to do in the world; and if the readers of to-day still delight to read the poems of Chaucer, and are content to leave the bitter lines of Langland more especially to students of literature, it is partly because those lines have done their work, and the grosser abuses that gave them their keen interest have long passed away.

There has been much eager discussion upon the question whether young Chaucer ever studied at Oxford or Cambridge. Unhappily, the only possible conclusion we can reach is that there is no proof either way. It is hard for us to see where he acquired his learning unless he was for some time at one of the universities; for learning he had in a large measure, and

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his reading was extensive for one of his period.

As there is no mention of Chaucer anywhere until we find him at the age of seventeen in attendance as a page upon Elizabeth, wife of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, one of the sons of King Edward, we may believe that he had until that time been a student, and may have been at a university. Certainly he must have had access to some of the few libraries then in England; and those of Oxford and Cambridge seem to be the ones he would find most accessible. It is easier to suppose him a student at one of these institutions than to invent some less likely way for him to acquire the learning they would have given.

But we must not forget this is but guess-work, and that it is quite possible he began his service at the English court without more education than could be carried from the ordinary schools.

There took place in April, 1357, an im-

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pressive scene, in which one is glad to think Chaucer had a part. Then it was that the Black Prince came home in triumph from the victory of Poitiers, bringing the captive French king. The Prince and his royal prisoner came in grand procession through the London streets, and rode to Westminster Hall, where they were received by Edward and the court.

As the first entry upon the court records relating to Geoffrey Chaucer tells of his receiving clothes in April, 1357, it may be that this reception of the Black Prince was the reason for putting the spruce young page into his new attire. We are told that he then received a paltock, or short cloak, red and black breeches, and new shoes. Other clothes were bought for him in the following month; and in December, "for necessities at Christmas," he received two shillings and sixpence; money then being worth fifteen times as much as now.

1904 to 1938 :  $\times 2$  approx.  
1938 to 1960 :  $\times 2$  "  $\rightarrow$  by 1960 2s. 6d worth 15x4  
[figures based on Evelyn Baillie 34  
of 1957 see "Cost of Living"]  
62 x 22 x 11 = 15136  
17 = 100 = 17 1/2  
= 60 times  
as much  
as in  
Chaucer's  
day



## CHAPTER III

### CHAUCER IN THE ROYAL HOUSEHOLD— LIFE OF THE FEUDAL LORDS

AT about seventeen years of age, Chaucer, probably through his father's friends at the court, was appointed a page in the service of the Princess Elizabeth, wife of Lionel, who became, in 1362, Duke of Clarence. Lionel was known as "Lionel of Antwerp," because he had been born in that city in 1338; so he was at this time about two years older than Chaucer, or nineteen, while his wife was twenty-five. He had been married about five years.

His wife Elizabeth, born in Ireland, was daughter of the Lord of Connaught and third Earl of Ulster, William de Burgh—a Norman, as his name shows, and a descendant of the jailer of Prince

Rise in England 1904-1960 35 approx by 4 given 21.00  
his rise in cost of living approx 3 1/2 given 18.00  
1904-1960

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Arthur, mentioned in Shakespeare's "King John." She was called "Elizabeth of Ulster." Chaucer became a member of the household of the young couple, that is, he was one of the numerous attendants or servants who were in charge of their housekeeping.

It was no fanciful appointment, but one of real service. The pages of a noble lord or lady were expected to make themselves useful, and they did many things that to-day are done by hired servants. Each part of the daily work was in charge of special officers, and under these were the valets, pages, servants, clerks, who were responsible for seeing that their masters and mistresses were made comfortable. The great households of early days were very completely organized; in fact, they were almost independent of outside aid.

Thus there was a body of priests or chaplains to look after religious matters in the chapel, or private church; there was a

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surgeon and assistants; there were stewards, cooks, "pantlers," who looked after the food; there was a large force to attend to the stables; and, in short, each department was in charge of attendants, who gained their living by their services.

Something similar may be seen to-day in a great battleship—except that the markets now provide many things in such form as to be preserved, while in the Middle Ages supplies came in the rough, and had to be made ready for use from the very beginning.

Even the household furniture was made to order, and the very drinking-horns and table-ware had to be specially prepared when old ones wore out.

The wardrobe supplies were at this time very elaborate, since it was the fashion to wear rich stuffs, heavily embroidered in fanciful patterns; and since the stone castles were cold except in the rooms where enormous fireplaces could be piled

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high with logs, there was much fur used in the costumes, both as trimming and as lining, the costlier sorts being reserved for the nobles.

All these things had to be looked after, and you may be sure that the pages had little idle time on their hands. The dress-makers were all men, and the bills of the time show heavy charges for their work in the making, cutting, lining, padding, and ornamenting of the court dresses.

At the table, the pages were in attendance to cut up the meat, to hand dishes, to offer the ewer and napkin when hands were to be washed—a very necessary matter in those days, when forks were hardly in existence, though we are told that Gaveston, the favorite of Edward II., had one for eating fruit. Dinner was early, at about eleven o'clock, or earlier, and it was the custom for two to eat from each "trencher," a flat piece of bread or wood. Meat was cut into strips, so that it could be

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picked up and dipped into gravy and sauce; and old books show that for each of the various meats served certain special sauces or spices are to be served also.

It may be that Chaucer, who shows in one of his poems that he knew something of the preparation of various drinks for the table, made himself especially useful in this way, for there was a large variety of drinks, such as mead, made from honey, bragot, and hippocras, one of these two being ale, and the other a spiced wine.

Another duty of the pages was to serve as messengers either within or outside the castles, to fetch and carry, to do all ordinary errands, and generally to wait upon the lords and ladies, whether these were at home, upon journeys, or in the hunting-field.

Society at this time was regulated by a number of customs and rules, that were to be learned only by a long apprenticeship, and to acquaint himself with them was

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part of the page's duty. There were a store of polite phrases which the page heard from the lips of knights and ladies, methods of address adopted to all ranks, certain courteous usages every member of polite society was expected to know.

Not to be acquainted with them was to show oneself to be "of low degree"; and in reading Chaucer's poems it will be seen that he keeps a sharp line of distinction between the two great classes, and in the "Canterbury Tales" puts into the mouths of the "churls," or pilgrims of low degree, stories of a very different character from those told by the "gentle" or high-bred pilgrims. Even in our own times we have a similar code, though based on other principles; and none know better than the young how much patient teaching is required before the child learns "good manners," and is considered "well-bred."

In our army and navy we hear occasionally that an officer is charged with con-

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duct "unworthy of an officer and a gentleman." In the Middle Ages the code of chivalry or knighthood was in the same way a standard of conduct; and the page was the beginner in the training that fitted one to become a knight or the companion of knights and ladies.

Supposing, for instance, that it is dinner-time; someone from the lower part of the castle or palace would be sent to let those of the upper household know that dinner was ready, or there might be a signal given by the ringing of a bell or the blowing of a horn. Then the page would attend his master or mistress to the table, and see that all was made ready—a cushion on the bench, a clean trencher or platter, clean salt in the salter or salt-box, and a drinking-horn or goblet.

When the lord was seated, the page would go to the door of the hall and receive from the kitchen serving-men the dishes for the table, and carry them to the

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table. He offers them to those guests who are his especial charge, and they help themselves with their own spoons and knives. The page also pours out the drinks, carves the meats, and sees that the diner is kept supplied with whatever he requires, just as an attentive waiter in a modern restaurant would do.

Before and after meals it is the page's duty to carry about bowls, ewers, and napkins, so that the guests may cleanse their fingers. And it is to be hoped that once the people of higher degree were served, the pages were at liberty to help themselves.

We may see how a young fellow might rise in the world from that part of "The Knight's Tale" where Arcite, coming to the castle of Theseus, begins by serving as a laborer, "to drugge and draw," or drudge and carry, and then is made helper to the chamberlain, doing household work in-doors; and next becomes "page of the



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chamber," from which, because of his "gentle condition," or good manners, he is promoted to be "squire of the chamber," or personal servant of Lord Theseus himself. All this, though related of an ancient Greek, is of course according to the manners and usages of a feudal castle of Chaucer's day.

So well did the disguised Arcite perform his duties as squire that Chaucer says:

And three years in this wise his life he led,  
And bore him so in peace and eke in war,  
There was no man that Theseus held dearer.

(The language of the quotation is here slightly modernized.) This seems to show that even a laborer might, by gentle bearing and good conduct, rise to the dignity of a squire, from which knighthood was but a step, to be won by a worthy deed, or by the king's favor.

The nature of the life led in the great feudal castles, whether the palace of the

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king or the stronghold of a great noble, was much the same. The large assembly room or hall was usually on the ground floor. Here meals were served, and here the household gathered on all great occasions. At one end was a gallery for the musicians or minstrels, who played during banquets or for dancing and merry-making. The table in the centre of the room, or along the walls, was made by laying planks on trestles, and the guests sat about on long benches. If there was a large company, the tables were placed around the room near the walls, the guests sat with their backs to the walls, and the attendants passed to and fro in the middle. After meals, the tables were cleared away.

In the older castles there was often a great fire in the centre of the hall, upon a broad, flat, stone hearth, and the smoke drifted upward among the rafters, and escaped through a hole in the roof left for the purpose, called "louvre." There were

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chimneys in many of the important castles, but they were by no means universal for some years later.

The meals taken in daytime were lighted by great double windows, set deep in the walls, with window-seats below; at night, candles and torches set about the hall, and the light of the fire, made the great hall bright.

The floors throughout the castle were strewed with rushes, and there were in the dining-hall plenty of pet dogs to pick up the scraps the diners threw upon the floor. The knights' other pets, the hawks, were provided with perches along the walls, long pegs that also served now and again for clothes-pegs.

Here are some lines in which Chaucer sketches a feast in a great hall:

“ The minstrelsy, the service at the feast,  
The great gifts to the most and least,  
The rich array of Theseus' palace,  
Or who sat first or last upon the dais,

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What ladies fairest been, or best dancing,  
Or which of them can dancen best and sing,  
Or who most feelingly speaketh of love:  
What hawkes sitten on the perch above,  
What houndes liggen on the floor adown;  
Of all this make I now no mentioun.”

*Knight's Tale.*

The private rooms of the great castle were often well furnished and comfortable. The walls were concealed by long hangings of tapestry, painted or embroidered with scenes suitable to the room and its occupant. Chaucer often describes these pictured curtains. Large halls were divided into smaller apartments by similar hangings; and thus cosy chambers were formed in the great stone rooms that seem so bleak when they are seen without ornament or furniture. Fur rugs or mats kept the feet from the cold floors, and a mediæval lady was often quite as luxuriously lodged as one could wish.

The ladies of the nobility busied them-

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selves much as their descendants do, so far as in-door occupations go, excepting that there was less reading, as has been said. They were fond of embroidery, of gossiping over all forms of out-door sport, especially hawking, which must have given an endless number of topics concerning the noble birds—their breeding, their care, their training. There was also in Edward's reign a renewed interest in the fashions, since both men and women labored to outdo one another in making themselves conspicuous for the oddity of their attire and their extravagance in display. The long, pointed shoes, which at last were to be fastened to the knees by gold chains; the hanging sleeves, scalloped, nicked, or clipped into fancy edges; the gold, silver, and silk embroideries must have been discussed in the castles until the flickering torches went out.

Chivalry also furnished plenty of subjects for their talk, for it had a strange

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poetical code of gallantry, of high-flown love-making, that undertook to regulate and legalize all the wild absurdities we read of with so much wonder—such, for example, as is made use of in Dr. Doyle's story, "The White Company," where a knight goes to the wars with a patch over one eye, having vowed to wear it until the doing of some feat of arms. Another such vow is told of in Scott's "Castle Dangerous."

It was also a common amusement to listen to reading aloud; and in this way, most likely, did the young page Chaucer come to write poems. The step from reading aloud the ballads and rhymes of others to translating new ones into verse is not a difficult one; and from translating to composing new poems is even easier, if one has the capacity for both.

Education was not lacking in the royal household, for Edward had been taught by Richard of Bury, still renowned as a

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lover of books, and author of a volume in their praise; while some of Edward's children were instructed by a learned couple—Elizabeth and William de St. Omer—of whom there is still a memorial, their illuminated psalter. The Black Prince was educated by Walter Burley. Altogether, Chaucer was surrounded by an audience capable of appreciating good literature, and this had much to do with his career as a poet.

What were the books Chaucer, as a young man in the household of the Princess Elizabeth, may have read aloud to the inmates of the palace? He may have been able to amuse his hearers with the marvellous "Travels of Sir John Mandeville," for that strange production—now believed to be a mingling together of many extracts and episodes taken from earlier travellers—first appeared written in French about the time Chaucer entered the royal household. There were chron-

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icles of past events which, in portions at least, would have been heard with pleasure—such as those written by Robert of Brunne or Richard Rolle; there were the old Norman poems, the “Song of Roland”; the “History of the War of Troy”; the “Brut d’Angleterre,” by Robert Wace, and the same writer’s “Roman de Rou”; there were the legends of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and these we know to have been popular, because Edward had made for himself an enormous round table, to be used in the palace at Windsor; and there was the “Romance of the Rose,” translating which is thought to be the first serious and sustained work of Chaucer’s pen. The poems of Boccaccio, the Italian poet, were also well known to Chaucer, for in his earlier verse he translated from the celebrated Italian, and all through his life he shows acquaintance with Boccaccio, and uses freely material drawn from his writings.

In return for his services to the Princess,



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Chaucer received ample payment. There are records that clothing was provided for him, and he was sure of a place at the palace table. In addition, from what we know of the customs of the great households of the time, we may be sure that he came in for many a perquisite and reward. It was the fashion to be lavish, to keep open house, to bestow favors freely; which is not so very remarkable when we remember that the wealth of the nobles came to them without effort, and without payment for the goods, money, or services the producing classes were forced to contribute.

It seems to have been recognized that the lords of the land, in requital for the privileges they enjoyed, owed to the workers some return in generosity. The common people had for many years been considered as going with the lands they tilled, and as being entitled in return for their work to some share in the wealth they created for those who claimed the right to rule those lands.

## CHAPTER IV

CHAUCER BECOMES A SOLDIER, IS CAPTURED AND RANSOMED—HE MARRIES

IN speaking of Chaucer's becoming a page, mention was made of the pageant that marched through London when the Black Prince conducted King John of France, captured at the battle of Poitiers, to Westminster Hall. The royal prisoner had been since held in London.

During this captivity of the French king attempts were made to bring about a treaty of peace with France, and two cardinals came from France to London to learn what Edward demanded. King Edward was willing to renounce his claim to the French crown, but insisted that he retain all territory he had won, which would

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have given him half the kingdom of France, and asked four million golden crowns ransom for the king and other Franch captives. King John, being a prisoner, naturally signed the treaty; but his subjects were not in prison, and so rejected it, and the English king gathered an enormous force at Dover to invade France. He is said to have raised 100,000 men.

France in these years, 1358 and 1359, was in desperate condition. The uprising of the peasants, known as the "Jacquerie," had laid waste a great part of the country, for great mobs of ragged, hungry, desperate men had swarmed over the land, capturing even strong castles by mere weight of numbers, and leaving behind them blackened ruins and slain nobles. The uprising had been put down, but this class rebellion and the civil wars had left little security anywhere. The peasants, says a French historian, "had been forced

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to turn their church towers into fortresses," where sentinels remained to give warning of the approach of enemies. At night the farming folk lodged in boats moored in the rivers, or hid themselves with their cattle in underground caves. Crops almost failed, and famine was everywhere.

To invade a land so miserable—a land that could hardly feed its own people—it was necessary to take with the English army provisions for its support. King Edward prepared his army as if he were to enter a desert. It was the "largest, best-equipped, best-officered army England had ever sent forth," and besides English soldiers there were large numbers of European allies from Germany, Flanders, and other lands then at enmity with France. With the king were his four sons, and with the train of Lionel went his page Chaucer, upon his first military expedition.

In October the great force was landed at Calais, and when it advanced into the

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enemy's country it was followed by a procession six miles long of wagons, bearing mills, forges, grain, and even light fishing-boats of boiled leather, to be used on the rivers. There was no human enemy that could check their progress; but the November days and nights were cold, and rain "fell without ceasing." The English were miserable, and labored on to the city of Rheims—where Edward hoped to be crowned King of France; but after a siege of seven weeks Edward was compelled to march on. He advanced to Paris, and there met only the same enemies—cold, wet, hunger, for the French wisely remained within their walls, until famine should drive Edward away.

During some part of this expedition Chaucer fell into the hands of the French. It seems likely that he may have been captured while "foraging"—that is, wandering about the country trying to find some poor farmer who might still be in

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possession of a pig or cow or a sack of grain that could be carried off. The old chronicler Froissart says that during the two months that the English were before Rheims, "so great was the scarcity of corn of all sorts that parties were sent to forage as much as ten or twelve miles away."

Another way in which Chaucer may have been taken is while hunting. With King Edward were "thirty falconers on horseback, with their hawks, sixty couple of hounds, and as many greyhounds. Every day he took the pleasure of either hunting or fishing." Perhaps while upon one of these hunting expeditions Chaucer may have come into collision with some wandering body of French men-at-arms. He must have fallen into the hands of disciplined soldiers, as he was held for ransom. We know nothing, however, of the method of his capture, though it was during the siege of a little town, the name of which is variously given, but which was

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probably Réthel, in Ardennes, a little over twenty miles north-east from Rheims. This was in the district overrun by the English during the siege of Rheims, and was a fortified place of some size and strength. If this were the place of Chaucer's capture, the young soldier escaped the worst part of this unfortunate campaign—the hard march to Paris.

Edward's grand expedition meanwhile had failed, and he marched to Brittany, followed by French emissaries, who hoped to make peace; but Edward refused all terms, until convinced that there was nothing but disaster to be found in continuing the campaign. Although the French army would not fight, the miserable peasantry made all the resistance possible.

On the retreat from Rheims toward Paris, for example, there was a fierce skirmish at a village near Compiègne, in which a gigantic peasant, known as "Big Ferré," killed eighteen of the English with

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his axe and wounded more. The English, two hundred in number, took flight. A larger force met with the same fate, and then "Big Ferré" fell sick of fever, because, the old chronicler tells us, he "drank cold water."

Ferré being ill, the English sent twelve soldiers to take him; whereupon he rose from his bed, took up his axe, "which was so heavy an ordinary man could hardly lift it with two hands," and killed five of them, and the rest fled. But Ferré drank more cold water and died, leaving behind him the memory of his valorous deeds.

Some of the English were captured here, but we are told that the peasants slew their prisoners, so Chaucer, as has been said, was probably taken by regular soldiery.

After leaving Paris and marching southwestward, Edward's army was overtaken, April 13, 1360, by a hailstorm so furious that men and beasts were killed. The frightened king vowed that he would make



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peace, and within three weeks a treaty was signed at Brétigny. The record of the ransom of prisoners names Chaucer, and shows £16 paid by King Edward for his ransom or toward it. This amount, equal in value to over \$900 to-day, is less than the same record shows to have been paid for a war-horse—a fact only recorded as indicating that Chaucer was probably young (and hence born later than 1328), and not a seasoned warrior.

The length of Chaucer's imprisonment could not have exceeded a few months, as the treaty was signed early in May, 1360, and the document telling of the payment of ransom is dated March 1, 1360. We know that Edward arrived before the towers and walls of Rheims at the end of November, only to see the gates closed in his face by the archbishop. The siege lasted seven weeks or two months, so probably Chaucer's captivity lasted only from early in December, at worst, to March first

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—certainly not longer than three months, and possibly less.

This captivity was far from unlucky for the young soldier. In the first place it saved him from the terrible midwinter march to Paris, and the fruitless siege of the capital. And in the captivity we must not fancy Chaucer chained to a stone wall in some darksome dungeon, below the foundations of a gloomy dungeon tower, and fed upon dry bread moistened with draughts from a jug of stale water. In feudal days captives of any worth were held for the sake of their ransom. They yielded themselves formally when captured, and were then put upon parole, or promise not to escape. It was not necessary, therefore, to keep them securely, and there was no reason for maltreating a mere prisoner of war. Abuse of a captive was usually due to some personal spite or to feelings of revenge. Besides, it was quite possible that the next turn of fortune's

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wheel might make the captor captive to his prisoner; and this tended to insure kindly treatment.

We may imagine Chaucer, therefore, to have lived in the castle of some French lord, much as he had lived in his own land, and hardly conscious that he was in a foreign country. Undoubtedly he spoke French fluently, for even if Edward's French campaigns helped to render the language less popular, they certainly made it more familiar.

Chaucer would be likely to increase his reading of the French literature, if fortunate enough to be held in a castle where there were manuscripts. The literature of France was extensive and popular; that the works of French poets were familiar to Chaucer his later poems show. He may thus have made his first acquaintance with many of the amusing "fabliaux," or fables in rhyme, with the romances of Walter Map and Robert de Borrou, and with

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stories of the Round Table—all of which were in existence then—during his captivity; and the list may easily be made longer, for French literature then was copious.

The chief result of Chaucer's military experience is to be found in the contact with active life. It gave him a knowledge of the types of men who made up the English army. He saw in a campaign—inglorious though it was—the soldier in the field, on the march, in camp, in a siege.

His training in the tilt-yard, in the use of weapons, in climbing ladders, in riding and swimming (all these were practised by the squires of noble families), had made him appreciative of the feats of men-at-arms, and had given him a desire to see the renowned soldiers of England. The journey to France was worth while if it did no more than fill the poet's mind with the pictures of the knights in chain-mail protected by the artfully jointed plate-armor that fitted the figure closely and yet gave

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freedom of action; with the rich military "jupons" worn over the armor and bearing in colors the wearer's arms; the brightly colored surcoat that served as cloak; the gay pennons and standards, and all the pageantry of knighthood in arms, finery to delight an artistic eye.

Together with these brilliant figures, Chaucer must have learned to know the worth of the English archers. Since the battles of Crécy and Poitiers the archers had ranked high in the estimation of king and people. Minor engagements might still be fought without them, but great battles were to be won mainly by the artillery—the longbow-men. These were the English citizens, the men of cities, towns, and countryside, bowmen from early boyhood.

English archers wore no armor, and needed none, beyond a metal headpiece. They carried long "mantelets," or shields, and were dressed in quilted jerkins. Through their belts a knife was carried,

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but they did not expect to fight at close quarters. They did not stand to receive a charge of horsemen, but left that task to their own horsemen, who bore lances, axes, maces (steel clubs), and heavy swords. The archers were meant to prevent the charge; and this they had done at Crécy, where their long shafts had pierced armor of horse and man even at 900 feet distance.

Another sort of soldier was the Welsh or the Irish footman, armed only with a long knife or a spear, but greatly to be dreaded by the dismounted knight whose horse had been slain under him. Of little value until the enemies were in disorder, these irregular soldiers completed the rout when once the ranks had been broken.

With all these, as well as with the armorers, the camp-followers, the drivers of the great four-horse wagons that carried the supplies, Chaucer became familiar; and by this expedition he came to know many classes of the English people with

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whom his previous life had given him no intimate acquaintance; and thus his knowledge and his human sympathies were broadened. No other writer of his time had so wide and so deep a view of humanity, and though Chaucer's poems were written for a noble audience—the true “*gentle* readers,” for that is the meaning of the words—he enters into the life and souls of his characters of all degrees, and makes us feel his sympathy with them as hardly another writer in all our literature has done.

Even Shakespeare holds himself more aloof from the common people, touches them less tenderly, views them with less kindness. And Chaucer perhaps owes his breadth of sympathy to such experiences as this dreary campaign in French territory, when the English soldiers needed all their good-humor and fellow-feeling to help their endurance of frost, famine, and hardship.

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After his release from captivity Chaucer made his way back to London, travelling probably on horseback, and certainly taking advantage of whatever escort he could, since France was then overrun with adventurous robbers, discharged soldiers, outlawed peasants, and could not have been a safe land for the lonely traveller. Arriving at the coast, he would have no difficulty in securing a vessel to England, since there were regular boats sailing across the channel and carrying passengers at a fixed price; and once in his own country, he would soon find himself once more in the household of the king.

There were plenty of public events during Chaucer's life at the English court, and it would be easy to make a list of these, and then imagine him taking the part in them that would naturally fall to an attendant upon the king. But this takes much for granted. Of course it is likely that he was at some of the more important



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—such as the great feast held at Windsor in honor of the founding of King Edward's famous Order of the Garter, in 1357; at the reception to Prince Edward, when returning in triumph from Crécy, as already told; at Christmas merrymakings; or at the ceremonious funeral of Queen Isabella, which was held in Greyfriars Church, London.

But he may have been left at home while more important officials were in attendance on the royal outings, and after all it is the ordinary routine of his life that is most interesting. The thought of the poet making up the royal beds, arranging the hangings of the walls, carrying torches to light the dark halls, or setting the table for dinner, brings him nearer to us than to imagine him in his "paltock," or short cloak, and his red and black breeches, mounted upon horseback in a gay procession through London streets. In a crowd of courtiers he seems to lose individuality;

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but to imagine him sitting in the ante-chamber, reading some old parchment while he is waiting a summons from his patrons, is to help us to understand how his mind took shape, and how he learned to make poems.

There is nothing to show just how long he remained in the service of Prince Lionel. His ransom, or part of it, was paid by the king, and this may be evidence that he had already been promoted to attend upon King Edward. We know that in later years this change took place, but cannot date its beginning, unless we consider that when Lionel was appointed to be the king's lieutenant in Ireland, in 1361, Chaucer remained in England and was transferred to the father's retinue.

A more important question that belongs to these years between Chaucer's return from France and his appearance in the court accounts as "valettus," or serving-man to Edward, in 1367, is the poet's mar-

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riage. There has been much controversy about the time of the marriage and the identity of his wife—controversy that may be carefully reviewed by those who wish to settle the question for themselves. The best opinion seems to be that he was married, about 1365 or 1366, to Philippa Roet, one of the ladies in service at court, holding in the queen's service the same position that Chaucer held in that of the king. She was daughter of Sir Paon de Roet, of Hainault, and sister of Catherine Roet, widow of Sir Hugh Swynford. This sister taught the children of John of Gaunt, and became in later years his wife, and from her was descended Henry VII.

Though this Philippa is by some critics said to be not the Philippa whom Chaucer married (a pension granted in 1374 shows that Philippa was his wife's name), yet there is a curious proof that she was a Roet. Thomas Chaucer, who in later years was speaker of the House of Com-

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mons, used two coats-of-arms. One is the same that we find on the poet's tomb in Westminster Abbey. The other is that of the Roet family. This Thomas is believed to be Chaucer's eldest son by Philippa Roet, and therefore to have borne both coats-of-arms. Those interested in heraldry may be glad to have the description of these arms. Chaucer's are "Per pale argent and gules, a bend counter-changed." The Roet family bore "Gules, three Catherine wheels or." This seems strong proof. If it be accepted, if Chaucer married one so closely allied to the royal family, it is easy to understand all the aid he received from them throughout his whole life.

## CHAPTER V

### CHAUCER'S EARNINGS AND HIS FOREIGN JOURNEYS

So now, as a preparation for his poetical life, we see Chaucer returning to London, to enter once more upon his service in the king's household. All we know of this part of his life is taken from dry account-books and official entries, and now and then we can add to these a gleam of information derived from his poems.

But of Shakespeare we know no more than this, except a few scraps handed down by tradition; and whether we can rely upon these, we cannot tell.

Both poets, if the evidence is to be accepted, were practical men of business: Shakespeare as manager, playwright, and land-owner, Chaucer as court attendant and

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officer of the customs. Supreme in works of the imagination, neither lacked practical ability.

Chaucer's business life covered about forty years, and his writings never seemed to interfere with his business life. He was employed while at home in England in clerk work of a minute and painstaking kind, and when sent abroad he gave his services to the king in the most important matters, and had for his companions men of high position.

The first item in the accounts that names Chaucer concerns the granting to him of a life pension, or allowance of twenty marks a year. He is called in the grant "*dilectus valetus noster*," which is about equal to the English phrase "our trusty follower." From the amount of the salary we may argue something of his importance in the royal household. The mark was an amount, not a coin; and twenty marks meant 3,200 silver pennies

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a year—such pennies as are still preserved in the British Museum. Allowing for the greater buying power of money five centuries ago, Chaucer enjoyed an income equal to about \$5,000 a year.  $\times 3\frac{1}{2} = 1930 = \$17,500$

For a young man of twenty-seven or so this was an excellent income, and shows he was holding a place of some importance, that he was a substantial citizen of London, able to provide comfortably for himself and his wife Philippa.

And when we note the dry facts of the poet's business life, it must not be forgotten that in with the working days came the days and the evenings of recreation. London under Edward III was anything but dull, even when we note only the happenings historians have thought worth describing; and there were minor merrymakings and spectacles in abundance.

Thus old chronicles tell us that it was not unusual for the damsels of London city to dance at evening in the streets until

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moonrise, being rewarded for especial skill by garlands of flowers. There were street musicians to play before the citizens' doors, jugglers to show tricks, even public storytellers to amuse city idlers. Then we must not forget the trade-guilds with their banners and processions; the hunting parties with hawks and hounds, riding through London streets early in the morning; the general keeping of holidays—such as May-day, with its dances and sports.

All these found place, and Chaucer knew them, for we shall meet in his poems with descriptive bits proving his acquaintance with that side of life. But now we will briefly note the facts of his business career, treating it generally and once for all, not taking it up year by year. All the rest of his business life was that of an active, mature man until his death, at about the age of sixty, and was really separate from his life as a poet.

He remained, except for an interval to



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be spoken of later, officially attached to the king's court. A valet in 1367, he became a "squire of less degree" in 1368; and four years later he is entitled "*regis scutifer*," or "king's shield-bearer," that is, *squire*, and sometimes "armiger," or "arms-bearer." Both of these are merely titles of rank, rather than descriptive of practical duties; for we know Chaucer was more a man of business than either courtier or soldier by profession. In 1369, however, there is a record of a payment of £10 made to Chaucer while in the war in France; and in April, 1370, his pension was not drawn by him in person but by another, which may show that Chaucer was abroad for some time upon a second military expedition. This expedition had no picturesque features, and resulted only in an English army's marching about over the ravaged land of France while their enemies remained shut securely in fortified cities, safe from attack and refus-

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ing to risk a battle with the invaders. Nothing is known about Chaucer's experiences with the English army, and it is even doubtful whether he took any part in this campaign commanded by the Black Prince.

In June, 1370, letters of protection—a passport—were issued to Chaucer “on occasion of his going abroad in the service of the king,” Professor Lounsbury says, and adds that we know nothing of his errand, and can argue nothing from the record unless it is that Chaucer had then returned to England from the expedition to France.

Tantalizing as are these scraps of knowledge, it is only by piecing together these little bits and arguing about them that men are gradually putting in shape the facts concerning the poet's life. For years scholars have been patiently reading and examining enormous masses of accounts, letters, documents, records, receipts, and noting carefully every scrap that gives the

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least promise of contributing something about Chaucer's doings, and the result has been at least to prove that many stories told of the poet upon the authority of careless writers cannot be true. So we must be patient with the useful little dates, even if they do not interest us intensely.

Thus we learn from an entry in another account that in June, 1374, John of Gaunt granted ten pounds a year for life to the poet and his wife, probably in substitution for a pension that had been conferred on Philippa Chaucer two years before. Another gift, made in April of the same year, was a daily pitcher of wine to be received "at the port of London from the hands of the king's butler," and this gift also was commuted into a sum of money, which later was fixed at twenty marks a year for life. This addition doubled Chaucer's salary, and made him a well-paid official while still under forty.

There were also other allowances made

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him, in the nature of commissions for services in taking charge of the estates of minor children, and fines granted him during his service as customs-officer, and at this time it will not be extravagant to consider the poet as enjoying an income of a value approaching \$15,000. 160  
32.00

For this handsome payment Chaucer no doubt gave good value in personal work. One sort of employment in which he was engaged now and then for ten years was as king's commissioner abroad. Between 1370 and 1380 he appears to have gone six or seven times to foreign countries on the king's service. One time has been noted in 1370; two years later Chaucer went to Genoa and to Florence, being absent nearly a full year, and in this journey, if in no previous one, it is possible that he saw the Italian poet Petrarch. In 1377 Chaucer made two other journeys; and at this time Froissart names him as one of those sent to France to arrange a

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formal marriage between Richard, heir to the English crown, and Princess Isabel of France, then a small child. One more mission to France, in 1378, and another to Lombardy complete the list.

For our purposes we need not bear these journeys in mind except as indicating the nature of Chaucer's services to the government. They cover a wide variety of subjects. That to Genoa was diplomatic and commercial, having to do with the question of a harbor in England for the Genoese merchants. One to France concerned a royal marriage and the making of peace between the nations; others had to do with military matters. All this indicates that the poet was skilled in affairs, a man of good judgment, and trustworthy in matters of greatest importance; for in such duties the king would not have wished to employ one who was merely an agreeable maker of verses, a pensioned poet, and personal friend.

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As to the journeys themselves, one might envy Chaucer the experiences they brought him. Undoubtedly the noblemen and king's commissioners travelled on horseback and accompanied by a suitable escort of soldiers and attendants. Ferried over the straits of Dover in big sail-boats, they would land at Calais, and there find entertainment in some of the numerous inns, or possibly with the English who lived in the castle in the city.

From Calais they would ride forth into the open country, timing their journey so as to bring them by night to some town or city that could give them shelter and food, and ever on the lookout during the day for the outlaws who considered travellers as their rightful prey. Every bit of woodland was a possible ambushade, and only to be entered with caution.

Upon their way they would see rising here and there upon a mound, or resting within the bend of a river, one of those

great strongholds that had so often protected the French during the English invasions—walled towns that were enormous fortresses, with towers, keeps, and moats; single castles extending over acres of ground, and rising hundreds of feet into the air, great blank piles of stone, scarcely broken by windows that were little more than loop-holes; manor farms hardly less fortified than the castles themselves. For this was the age when feudal castles were at their strongest and most picturesque period.

In the wilder parts it is probable they met few people, for the villeins and thralls were only too glad to keep out of the way of their superiors, and farming labors were carried on usually within safe distance of some retreat from attack. Those parties met upon the road were likely to be either travellers like themselves; wandering churchmen protected by their office; the minstrels, mummers, tumblers, or

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other mountebanks whose calling required them to lead an unsettled and nomadic life; or the hunting parties that with hawks and dogs roamed over the country.

There was not so much difference then as now between the inhabitants of one country of Christendom and another, save for the peculiar customs of small localities. The English and the French peasant were much alike, so were the merchants of Paris and those of London; while the knights and soldiers could be distinguished from one another only by their coats-of-arms and other badges. The armor was not very different in different countries, for a knight was glad to get the best-made mail wherever it was produced. There was no military uniform. The church, too, dressed its members alike in all lands: the French priest was like the Spanish priest; the English bishop like the Italian.

All this followed naturally from the sway of feudal customs over all Christen-



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dom. Even the method of dividing off the farming lands had been affected by the same cause. In assigning work to villeins and thralls, land had to be marked into long, narrow strips, rather than into square fields. One of these strips was the amount to be ploughed, planted, and reaped by a certain dependent in giving due service to the lord. Though this system was passing away, its effects upon land division long remained.

These considerations may tend to show that in the days of Chaucer foreign travel had something less of strangeness in it, so long as the journeys were confined to the more familiar parts of Europe. Castles and walled cities were generally similar everywhere; costume did not vary greatly; general customs differed but little. As to landscape, natural scenery was little regarded save by a few men far ahead of their time—of whom Chaucer was one—and the traveller, unless he could tell of

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strange adventures or the marvels of unexplored regions, would excite little interest by telling his own countrymen of his journeys.

This helps us to understand the absence of the "travel literature" in the writings of travellers of the time. In reading the "Chronicles" of Froissart, for example, we find him describing persons and events rather than countries and scenes; recording fully stories of battles, tournaments, and sieges, but only by accident putting in particulars as to the general state of the lands he saw and the peoples whom he knew. Froissart was probably a few years older than Chaucer, and it is likely that the two met on more than one occasion. Indeed, Froissart (according to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*) mentions Chaucer as being with Prince Lionel, on the expedition to Milan, to marry the daughter of Galeazzo Visconti; and records that Petrarch was a guest at the wedding-banquet, seated

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among the princes. This was in June, 1368. But all this is disputed by some authorities.

From Froissart's book we may learn how a dinner was conducted in one of the feudal castles—the lord of a castle being preceded to supper by twelve servants bearing lighted torches, and being entertained by minstrels during the two hours he sat at table. Fanciful dishes were ceremoniously placed before him, and then sent in compliment to be placed before his guests. ✓

In this formal way Chaucer and his distinguished companions in embassies were entertained by the knights whose castles they visited; and during these hospitalities Chaucer would have opportunities to listen to the poems and ballads recited for the hearing of the guests, and would thereby become familiar with the literature of the time rather by way of amusement than as a serious study.

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Singing and recitations were often varied by the "jongleurs," or jugglers and acrobats, with their trained animals, who exhibited feats of strength or skill, and to such shows Chaucer makes allusions in his poems.

## CHAPTER VI

### CHAUCER AT HOME IN LONDON—HIS BUSINESS LIFE

ON the authority of some statements in the "Testament of Love," once included with Chaucer's works, it was formerly asserted positively that he was a native of London. But this piece of writing is now excluded from the collection of his authentic works, and we do not know with certainty more than that Chaucer was long a resident of the city.

The greater part of his life was passed there save for enforced absences, when upon royal errands or in attendance upon his patrons of the king's household, and it is not strange that he found abroad no city to rival London in his heart.

Close by his father's home were two

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monuments of the past that even in his day spoke of antiquity—the Tower of London, that part of it known as the White Tower, and Westminster Abbey had stood certainly for more than two hundred and fifty years at the time of Chaucer's first knowledge of them, and London was already an old city and the capital of England before their beginning. The White Tower was built on the foundations once laid for a Roman stronghold, and to men of Chaucer's period the city was already ancient, although we consider them as living in the childhood of modern England; and one visible sign of the city's age was the great fortress, the monument of William the Conqueror, and the home of all his descendants. All the Edwards had occupied it, and it had been ever the centre of England's power.

The Abbey, called by Frederick Harrison "the true cradle of the mother of Parliaments," and the Hall of Westminster

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are grouped by that English writer, with the Tower, as completing the "three matchless remnants of Old London"; and all were familiar to Chaucer from his boyhood, and prominent in his mental picture of the city.

During his life a clock in Westminster was made to strike the hours, a mechanical marvel for those days, and worth mentioning, as it must have been a nine days' wonder in London. He must have been present sometimes at the building of Windsor Castle, for in 1344 Edward-III planned a great Round Tower to be built here because he believed King Arthur had placed his Round Table in the same spot. Edward intended the castle as a meeting-place for the "Knights of the Garter," his newly established order, and also erected a chapel of St. George near by. To carry out these building operations the king made regular levies of workmen, summoning craftsmen from various localities, so

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many from each town, as if calling out an army, which reveals something as to the treatment of laborers in those days.

The duties performed by Chaucer while resident in London were at first in connection with the customs of the port of London. June 8, 1374, he was appointed "controller of the customs and subsidy of wools, skins, and tanned hides" in that port, and by the terms of his appointment was required to do the work in person and to keep the records in his own handwriting.

The nature of work must have been that of inspector and recorder of the cargoes unloaded and loaded, and keeper of the accounts of the port in regard to the merchandise mentioned.

As wool-growing was becoming constantly more important in England, Chaucer's position was no sinecure. The great plague had made farm laborers scarce, and grazing required fewer men than agriculture, so more and more acres were being



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devoted every year to the raising of sheep and cattle.

Chaucer at this time lived over that gate of London known as Aldgate, having leased the dwelling the month before his appointment in the customs service. In this place he lived twelve years, probably having selected it as being convenient for his work as customs official. If this work required him to go every day to the Thames his natural route would be directly past the Tower, morning and evening.

If we do not forget that we are merely making believe, we can imagine Chaucer arising in the morning, hurrying through his breakfast, and making his way along the busy streets to his place of business. Then, with his ink-horn at his girdle and quill-pen in hand, we can imagine him listening to the Flemish merchants, eagerly desirous of finishing "that bothersome custom business with Master Chaucer," the

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king's comptroller. We see him taking toll of the "tods" of wool, the bales of hides, or rolls of leather, fixing the charges and, it may be, disputing with some sharp fellow who is trying to cheat the customs, and needs looking after.

Edward the Third was trying, by means of a single tax on wool, to do away with a great number of other charges, and thus to simplify business, and also to secure the large revenue necessary in that age of military expeditions, foreign wars, and improvements at home. This was the result of a sort of bargain he had made with his people as represented by the first regular parliament.

The wool trade was the most important to the crown of any in the kingdom, and with this Chaucer was concerned.

After a day spent thus, Chaucer was no doubt only too glad to walk away from leather, wool, merchants, and all that reminded him of trade. He would arrive

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at his rooms over the Aldgate, in the thickness of the city wall, and be glad enough to lay aside his hood and long gown for some lighter garment.

We are forbidden, however, to grant him either a morning cup of coffee before starting out or an after-dinner cigar when the day's work was done. Several hundreds of years must pass before either is attainable in England. But we are not forbidden to represent him as welcomed home by a loving wife to a cleanly set of rooms and a comforting dinner. For although some biographers of the poet are convinced that the poet's married life was unhappy, the evidence they bring forward to support their opinion seems to be entirely too slight to warrant any such inference.

Let us for a moment examine this evidence for ourselves, as we may easily do, since it consists of a few extracts from his poems, and a brief argument based upon

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them, and since the tradition that Chaucer's married life was unhappy is one that should be laid to rest if it be unwarranted.

First, it is to be plainly understood that we know nothing whatever about the marriage by direct testimony. No one has ever claimed any knowledge on the subject. But there are a few passages in Chaucer's works in which his remarks on wives and marriage, and his supposed allusions to his own experience, are supposed to indicate his dissatisfaction.

It has already been said that Chaucer's marriage took place about 1366 or not long before. One of the few poems which can be positively dated is Chaucer's "Book of the Duchess," for it must have been written about the time of the death of Blanche, first wife of John of Gaunt, being based upon that event. She died in the autumn of 1369, during the third great pestilence that occurred during King Edward's reign.

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In this poem Chaucer begins by lamenting that he cannot sleep because of a settled melancholy and depression he has suffered eight years. The cause of this he declares is unknown to himself, and that there is "physician but one that may me heal; but that is done."

This concludes the passage, since the poet then begins to tell the vision of which the poem consists. But upon this allusion critics have built up a romantic story, as a boy might blow a tiny film of soapy water into an enormous bubble. They begin by assuming that the "sickness" lasting eight years was an unrequited love for some fair but hard-hearted damsel—who is the "one physician," mentioned in the poem, that could bring him relief from the miseries of a disappointed lover.

If Chaucer had been a despairing lover from 1361 to 1369, either he was in love with someone else than his wife (though his marriage took place about 1366!) or

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else he was not married till after this poem was written.

To combat such a vague argument as these lines in the "Book of the Duchess" furnish seems worthy of Don Quixote, fighter of windmills. If asked what the lines mean, what the "sickness" lasting eight years could have been, it seems simpler to say that we do not know. Possibly Chaucer was a high-strung, intellectual man, a little overworked, and found trouble in sleeping. Who the "one physician" may have been we do not know either. But it does seem that any fair-minded reader would find these few vague lines an insufficient basis for the fanciful structure some have erected upon them. Professor Lounsbury says these are "words whose meaning no man knows, and probably no man ever can know," and this view seems eminently sane.

So much for that suggestion of an unhappy marriage. Of course, if we assume

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(as some do) that Chaucer's marriage was subsequent to the supposed love-affair, there is nothing in the lines to affect the happiness of his marriage one way or the other.

Two more passages are by some thought to give evidence toward proving that Geoffrey and Philippa were not a happy couple. There is one in "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton"—Chaucer's Counsel to Bukton concerning Marriage. This is a cynical little poem, written late in Chaucer's life, containing the usual smart commonplaces against marriage, and a humorous admission that the author dare not speak against marrying for fear lest he should marry again; and also advising his friend to marry, since, whatever its troubles, marriage is a better state for men than single life. In short, this poem has no claim to be cited as a proof even that Chaucer believed most marriages unhappy, and sheds no possible light on his own ex-

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perience. It is written some nine years later than the death of Philippa Chaucer, so even if his life with her had been unhappy Chaucer's sense of suffering could not have been especially poignant. The poem says only, "If you are contented, why take any risk?" and points out that marriage is in a sense always a bondage.

The third passage relied on is in the "House of Fame," and represents Chaucer as carried aloft by Jove's messenger, the eagle. Chaucer swoons, and is brought to by the eagle's voice saying: "Awake!" The poet says the summons was given—

"Right in the samè voice and steven  
That useth one I couldè neven."

Which means, "the call to awake was in the same voice used by one I could name." And from this it is argued that Chaucer referred to his wife; that she used to call him in the morning in a voice like an eagle's; that she was unkind to him; that therefore he was unhappily married!



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One grudges the time and space to answer such reasoning. The case may be safely left to the judgment of any unprejudiced reader, with full confidence that it will be plainly seen there is no evidence to prove Chaucer's marriage either fortunate or otherwise. The chances are that it was about the same as a million other marriages and partnerships—with much to make it a blessing and some things to regret.

As little to be trusted are other theories based upon selected portions of Chaucer's writings. Authorship is one thing and autobiography another, and it would be an easy matter to make a long list of writers whose lives were anything but parallel to their writings.

Of the appearance of Chaucer in manhood we luckily are fairly sure. A portrait of him was painted by his friend, the poet Occleve, on the margin of a manuscript. This picture was expressly said to

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be painted from memory for the purpose of insuring that the features of Occleve's friend and master might not be forgotten. Of this portrait Occleve speaks thus:

“ Although his life be queynt, the resemblance  
Of him hath in me so fresh liveliness,  
That to put other men in remembrance  
Of his person, I here his likeness  
Do make, to this end in soothfastness,  
That they that have of him lost thought and mind,  
By this painture may again him find.”

It is the familiar portrait so often reproduced, showing Chaucer wearing a dark hood, the end of which falls just back of his left shoulder, and a long, loose-sleeved robe with a clerical collar. In one hand is what looks like a string of beads, and the other hand is raised as if he were speaking. The face is mild and grave, the forehead broad, the chin fine and pointed. Beard and hair are gray, and moustache and beard are both clipped close.

The portrait shows a most attractive

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personality, and a man full of dignified good sense.

In the "Canterbury Tales" also there is a pen-portrait of the author, which may be quoted, though we must bear in mind the possibility that in writing of himself a description to be read aloud the poet may have introduced certain exaggerations or contradictions with the purpose of amusing his audience.

The Host, who had the direction of the pilgrims, calls upon Chaucer to contribute his story:

"What man art thou?" quoth he.

"Thou lookest on the ground as thou wouldest find a hare,

For ever upon the ground I see thee stare.

Approachè near and look up merrily.

Now, ware you, sirs, and let the man have space.

He in the waist is shaped as well as I;

This were a poppet in an arm to embrace

For any woman, small and fair of face.

He seemeth elfish by his countenance,

For unto no wight doth he dalliance."

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

The allusion to Chaucer's waist is of course a playful way of saying that he was stout, for the Host was of a portly figure; and other references by the poet show a tendency to call himself fat. We must not take this too seriously, however, for Occleve's portrait is not at all that of a portly man, either in face or figure, and we all know it is quite the regular thing for humorous writers to make capital out of good-humored references to their own defects. Possibly he may have been small and slender.

If in this chapter there has been some digression upon points not connected with the events of the poet's life at this time, the explanation and excuse are found in the statement so frequently made in telling the facts of his life—there is absolutely nothing except a few dated records to cover long years.

## CHAPTER VII

### CHAUCER AND THE EVENTS OF HIS TIME —THE CHURCH

LIKE all men who are fond of reading, Chaucer felt that he was inclined to read too much; and in his poems he reproaches himself for burying himself among his books as soon as his day's work is done. Possibly, like other wives, Dame Chaucer thought there would be nothing so good for her husband after a day at the office or docks as a "brisk walk in the fresh air." If so, like other husbands, Chaucer disregarded her advice sometimes, and remained at home, with two or three candles on his table, his elbows propped up, and his eyes upon his beloved books and manuscripts, or bent over his writing until the small hours.

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

His tastes were purely literary, for his writing proves that he cared more for the world of imagination than for the happenings of the day about him. Even less than Charles Lamb—who at least gave us some glimpses of his business—does Chaucer let the affairs of the customs creep into his writings.

Often quoted are these lines, really addressed by the poet to himself:

“ For when thy labor done all is,  
And hast y-made thy reckonings,  
Instead of rest and newè things,  
Thou goest home to thine house anoon,  
And, all so dumb as any stoon,  
Thou sittest at another book  
Till fully dazèd is thy look,  
And livest thus as an hermyte  
Although thine abstinence is lyte.”

These lines are supposed to be said to Chaucer by the same eagle of Jove who is represented as having cried to him “Awake!” as already told. They show us

## *Public Events—The Church*

the poet in the occupation which meant most to us. The so-called "practical" part of his life—the money-making, business side—has left no trace except a stray line here and there in the musty records of a dead time. But Chaucer's porings over the pages of his little library brought about the creation of a literature, and added to that literature the eternal treasure of his own poems.

Which then were the truly productive, valuable hours of his life?

So far as we are concerned the life of Philippa Chaucer was of value only so far as she may have helped or hindered her husband in his making of literature; and of their children we likewise take little heed. From the dedication of Chaucer's treatise on the use of the "Astrolabe"—an instrument that for most of the world to-day is hardly more than a word in the dictionary—to his son Lewis, then ten years old, we learn all we know of one

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

child. From the evidence of the coats-of-arms and a remark by a neighbor, we conclude that Thomas Chaucer, a man of considerable distinction in after years, was also a son of Geoffrey and Philippa; but that is the entire amount of knowledge we have of the poet's family.

✓ They are dead, in every respect; the poet's works are to us as alive as they were to the poet himself.

✓ It is remarkable how little connection can be traced between Chaucer's writings and the happenings of the time. In 1369 the death of Blanche gave rise to the "Book of the Duchess," with its exquisite lament over the death of a beloved wife; but there is no chronicle by Chaucer showing that he was moved to poetical expression by the death of Queen Philippa, of Lionel, his old master, of the Black Prince, or of the great King Edward himself. The poet could not have been in any respect a "poet-laureate" to the royal family.



## *Public Events—The Church*

There was no actual poet-laureate until the times of the Stuarts, though Chaucer has often been mentioned as the first of the poets-laureate of England. All of these distinguished people must have been his friends, and yet he writes nothing of their lives or their deaths.

And so of historical events. During Chaucer's manhood England was in a turmoil of changing opinions, and of stirring happenings, domestic and foreign. Three great plagues devastated the land; and in all Chaucer's thousands of lines there is but one side-glance referring to them, and that is in a satirical remark about the gains made "in pestilence" by the Doctor of Physic, one of the Canterbury Pilgrims.

Shakespeare finds plenty to tell us about Jack Cade's rebellion after over a hundred years had passed; but Chaucer, living, so far as we know, in the very city of London when the thousands of Tyler's men captured the city, defied the king's officers,

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

burned public buildings, broke into the Tower, and murdered the primate of all England—Chaucer has nothing to write of all this, except to compare the noise made in the pursuit of a fox with the shouts of the rioters when in pursuit of a Fleming or Flanders merchant.

John Wycliffe, the great reformer of the English Church, finished his translation of the Bible when Chaucer was about forty years old. Even if we might see nothing strange in a poet's ignoring the active life about him and refusing to comment upon political events, we would expect any man of thoughtful nature and serious mind to show himself moved by the efforts of a great teacher to purify religion and reform the church. Yet there is not the slightest proof upon which we can make the assertion that Chaucer was even a follower of Wycliffe or a believer in him or his methods.

We can from his poems argue certain

## *Public Events—The Church*

opinions, but there is nothing definite to connect the two men, though both were at one time or another conducting business matters for the court at home and abroad, and both were trying by their writings to spread the use of English as against Latin and French. There is no way to explain Chaucer's complete disregard of the great movement in which Wycliffe was leader except by the statement that as a poet Chaucer did not find himself interested in such matters unless they took living shape in the men and women whose stories are told in his verses.

As a soldier Chaucer did not consider himself or his campaigns worth reference in his poems; and the fortunes of the English rule in France he likewise ignored, though besides taking part in two expeditions Chaucer was a citizen of London from the time of Edward's first great victory to the complete loss of the French provinces.

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

But there is no need to lengthen the catalogue, when the whole matter can be summed up by saying that Chaucer the man and Chaucer the poet seem two distinct individuals. It will not do to say that all these great events did not interest him; but certainly they did not seem to him subjects for his verse. Others who wrote verse at the time found their inspiration just where Chaucer never sought it. Langland used his pen to show the woes of the people; Gower, Chaucer's friend, found many a lesson for preaching in verse; but Geoffrey, the son of John the Vintner, chose to create pictures in words and to interpret between his own time and the days that were to come.

This, as Chaucer did it, was a work in which he had no forerunners. Those from whom he learned the art of writing verse had devoted themselves to far different subjects. As Taine points out, there were two great ideas that ruled the minds of

## *Public Events—The Church*

men and fixed the forms in which writers expressed their thoughts up to the time of Chaucer. One was religion, the other was chivalry; one ruled the inner life, the other the life of action. To one or the other all poetry was devoted, and the poet must either preach in verse or he must sing songs of the knights or their ladies or recount the deeds of ancient heroes; and whether preaching his sermon or singing his ballad, the poet must obey the rules laid down for his guidance.

The native literature was cast in a few fixed forms. The writers of history recorded the little that was known of the past in rhymed chronicles; and it was seldom that a poet of unusual power, like Lawrence Minot, a northern writer who wrote in praise of Edward III and his victories, was able to put some life into his record of battles, and to show such skill in his rhyming and verse-making as to make

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his chronicle worth reading apart from the facts set down.

From the chronicle or rhymed history grew such satirical poetry as was written by Langland in his "Vision of Piers Plowman." This was an account in verse of the state of the people of England, made an allegory by giving fictitious names to the characters introduced, as in the title. And with the chroniclers, with Minot and Langland, must be mentioned the 'great Scottish poet, John Barbour, archdeacon of Aberdeen, who told in verse the adventures of Bruce, and became the source from which Sir Walter Scott drew many incidents in his poems.

All these may be considered the literary descendants of the old monks who made it a duty to hand down to future ages the notable events of their times. They wrote with little thought of taking or giving literary pleasure in their work, and were rather the world's diary-keepers than true

## *Public Events—The Church*

men of letters. If they chose to put their histories into verse, it was because that was the habit of their predecessors, a habit handed down from the days when history was put in rhyme, that it might be learned by heart. If their verse sometimes had the qualities of true poetry it was because some men must do well whatever task is laid on them.

With Chaucer's friend, John Gower, begins the conquest of the field of poetry by the English language. Gower's three long poems were written in three languages, first French, then Latin, and then, after Chaucer had shown the way, in English.

Gower's French poem was a sermon; his Latin poem was a moral allegory telling of the rising of the people under Tyler, Jack Straw, and John Ball the Priest; and his English poem is a collection of tales in verse illustrating that "love" which was the topic of chivalrous romances. Lowell finds Gower's work painfully dull and

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

monotonous, and, by contrast with Chaucer's, Gower's poems help to show how great were the poems of his rival.

From all these Chaucer learned little; but from the French and Italian writers he acquired much that enabled him to record in fitting form what his own clear mind noted in the world around him, in the people of his time.

It has been said that one land differed not more but rather less from another than the same lands differ to-day. But when we come to look at the people of a single nation, to consider the inhabitants of Chaucer's England, we shall find differences among them so great that we can with difficulty imagine the social state of the time.

And first of the great cleavages dividing Englishmen is that made by the Church. All are either clerical or secular. A barrier between these exists everywhere, marking off churchmen from laymen.



## *Public Events—The Church*

There is, in most of the world, no such division to-day. Then, the Church and its people were everywhere, and they were divided in every way from the rest of the world. They had their cathedrals, their churches, their abbeys, their monasteries, their courts. They had their own government, with its officials great and small. They had their own laws, customs, privileges, and rights—and even in costume they were distinguished from all around them.

It is hard for us to keep in mind the many classes into which the men of the Church were divided—the monks, the friars, the parsons, the pardoners, the summoners, the priests, the abbots, the deacons—there seems no end to the list. And each was sharply and clearly defined to the people of Chaucer's days. He will teach us to know something of them; but it is quite impossible for us to know these men as they were known then throughout Europe.

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

We must not forget, however, that these men were everywhere — in the streets, churches, shops, roads, and fields — and that each was known at sight for what he was. They were English, it is true, and among them there were many truly patriotic and loyal citizens; but far too many held their allegiance to the Church to be of first importance.

Had the Church then been in a sound and wholesome state it might have made this army of churchmen an influence for the highest good; but during Chaucer's life the Church in England was corrupt and weak, despite the efforts of such men as Wycliffe to reform its abuses. The wealth of England was largely controlled by religious corporations; and this meant that the lands and the people were held in virtual bondage to a master that oppressed them under pretence of gaining wealth for sacred purposes, and meanwhile supported an enormous number of non-producers out

## *Public Events—The Church*

of the rents, rates, tithes, and charges collected from the workers and tradesmen.

Many churchmen did useful work, for they had charge of the services, they taught in the colleges and schools, they conducted the hospitals and almshouses. But there were not places enough for all, and many were driven to unworthy methods in order to make a living: On the other hand, there were priests who lived as laymen did, and provoked criticism by their worldliness. They became dandified in dress, spent too much time in hunting and social pleasures, frequented the inns, and consorted with the nobles and the rich.

The monks, gathered into great communities under the rule of their own chiefs the abbots, considered themselves to be under the direct control of the pope and independent of the Church officials in England; and this came to be the rule. This resulted in their being such as their abbots made them, and good or bad accordingly.

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

The life in monasteries was not easy, but proved attractive to those who preferred the certainties of the cloister to the trials of life outside. The monks taught, kept the business accounts of their order, wrote the chronicles based upon information sent to them in letters or gathered from visiting travellers, illuminated the service-books, attended to the affairs of the monastery, its store-rooms, kitchens, stables, and yards, or went abroad to collect rents, transact business with their tenants, or to oversee their estates.

They held religious services, and for the most part were men like those outside—neither very good nor very bad.

The objection to the monasteries, in our opinion, lay in the withdrawal from the general life of the people rather than in any wrongs for which the monks could be held responsible. The monasteries were blessings to many neighborhoods, bringing “art, worship, devotion, learning, often in

## *Public Events—The Church*

the highest form at that time attainable, to a man's very doors." They civilized whole communities, so long as they remained sound and uncorrupt.

But the monasteries became too popular and too rich. Their friends showered gifts upon them, until altogether they held about a third of all the land and all the tithes of England.

With wealth the monasteries became absorbed more and more in the worldly side of their life. There was little leisure left for religious duties when the day's work was made up so largely of business and money-making. The abbot was the head of a great estate, and the minor officials were his assistants in managing farms, sheep-runs, houses, bridges. The old idea of their life was gone, and with it went much that had led to their prosperity.

As monks lost spiritual power, the order of friars arose. "Wherever people were wont to gather over the length and breadth

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

of the land—at fair, at market, at joust, at morrice dance, at pilgrimage, at village festival—there was the friar to be found preaching in homely and telling fashion.

. . . The true and deep revival of personal religion all over Europe in the thirteenth century is in the main the work of the friars." So says Wakeman, the Church historian before quoted; but he is speaking of the early days of the order.

For they, too, soon lost their unselfish motives, and the friars became a set of worthless, tramping, begging vagabonds, preying upon the decent folk and living in vicious idleness.

Such were some of the churchmen Chaucer satirized.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CHIVALRY—THE POET'S LIFE AS AN OFFICIAL

THE second great influence of the Middle Ages, the institution known as Chivalry, had reached its greatest development somewhat earlier than during Chaucer's mature years. Under Edward III the external forms yet remained—the knights, squires, heralds, tournaments, pages—but their power over the minds of men was lessened. The young man who hoped for distinction as a soldier began, as we have seen in Chaucer's case, to serve as page to a knight or lady, was promoted to be an esquire, and might then, by the elaborate religious ceremony so often described, become a knight; or in special cases, as for a deed of valor on the battlefield, the honor

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

might be conferred by the mere "accolade," or sword stroke.

But in a country so highly developed as England in the reign of King Edward there were many other avenues to distinction than the path of chivalry. Great merchants, by trade and commerce, acquired wealth and social prominence; scholars gained respect through their learning; and even some writers attained eminence, though rather as a matter of popularity than of respect.

The writer who gave himself, as Chaucer did, to pure literature rather than to some form of sermonizing could hardly be expected to attain more than an increase of the kindly regard that was due to the minstrels or other entertainers.

Poetry had its place in chivalry, for it was cultivated together with music as part of the equipment of accomplished knight-hood. The minstrel who sang the exploits of knights, modern or ancient, was a wel-



## *Chivalry—Official Life*

come guest in the feudal castles. The story of the rescue of King Richard by the minstrel Blondel, even if not historical, shows the relation of the minstrel to those who held the highest ranks.

But as chivalry began in connection with warfare, so its rules and customs were always based upon military life, and the training of page, esquire, and knight looked to distinction in arms. The Church, pervading all mediæval life, strove to count chivalry an ally of religion, and gave rules to the knights, making their romantic code a Christian code as well.

Even on the battlefield the rules of chivalry were not disregarded, and a code of honor forbade cruelty or treachery to those who were within its provisions. For it must not be forgotten that the rules were primarily to govern the relation of knights to one another. A knight was bound to keep his plighted word on pain of losing the privileges of his rank. If set free on

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

parole, he must loyally redeem himself by paying his ransom or returning to captivity. An instance of this was seen in the return to England of John, King of France, when his nation had refused to pay the ransom demanded by Edward III.

It is impossible and unnecessary to give here a full account of even the main features of the institution of chivalry; but the reader of Chaucer must understand that it was still a living force during his lifetime, and that it was a large factor in the subjects chosen by the poet. Among his poems chivalry is a chief element in "The Romance of the Rose," "Troilus and Criseyde," many of the "Canterbury Tales," and to knighthood, the tournament, and the four ideals of chivalry—"valor, loyalty, courtesy, and munificence"—there are references everywhere.

Of the effect wrought upon the social life by chivalry there are widely differing opinions. The sentiments of Edmund

## *Chivalry—Official Life*

Burke, it has been pointed out, are at absolute variance with Edward Freeman's verdict. Burke says: "Never, never more shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom"; and he speaks also of "that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honor which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage while it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil by losing all its grossness."

Now let us hear the view of Edward Freeman:

"The chivalrous spirit is above all a class spirit. The good knight is bound to endless fantastic courtesies toward men, and still more toward women of a certain rank; he may treat all below that rank with any degree of scorn and cruelty. The

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spirit of chivalry implies the arbitrary choice of one or two virtues, to be practised in such an exaggerated degree as to become vices, while the ordinary laws of right and wrong are forgotten. The false code of honor supplants the laws of the commonwealth, the law of God, and the eternal principles of right."

✓ The clear-minded Chaucer saw both the good and the evil in the institutions of his time; and, by means of setting before us the good churchman and the bad, the noble knight and the unchivalrous soldier, he shows the strength and the weakness of both systems. Chaucer is thus more modern in spirit than Edmund Spenser; for Spenser's "Faërie Queene" is a resurrection of a state of things that had long passed, while Chaucer, though writing during the life of chivalry, sees the knight as he really is, and finds him purely human rather than the imagined ideal which Spenser paints for us.

## *Chivalry—Official Life*

Chaucer's attitude may have come from the fact that while he saw both the Church and chivalry, he was identified with neither. Chaucer was a London business-man during the greater part of his maturity. We have seen him employed about such prosaic matters as leather and hides, and dealing daily with merchants, sailors, and government officials.] Amid these occupations he remained, for the appointment as Comptroller of the Petty Customs in 1382 was rather a promotion than a change of employment. Even the trips abroad, from his thirtieth to his thirty-eighth year, were all practical in their nature; and when these ceased he remained in London engaged in civil duties. Thus, in 1389, we find him appointed Clerk of Works, and in 1390 he has charge, with others, of repairing the roadways along the banks of the Thames; in the same year he is named as one of two Foresters to North Pether-ton Park, in Somersetshire, and becomes

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sole Forester in 1398—an office held by Thomas Chaucer under Henry V in 1417, which may strengthen the belief that this Thomas was Geoffrey's son.

If we add to these few particulars the facts that Chaucer had charge of the arrangements for a grand tournament held at Smithfield in 1390, being allowed his charges in erecting scaffolds; and that in 1386 he was a member of Parliament, we shall have recorded all that is known of his life as an official.

Of his personal adventures there is an interesting record. We find that during 1390 the Clerk of the Works, Geoffrey Chaucer, was twice set upon by highway robbers—"an adventure," says Professor Lounsbury, "which entered so frequently into the experience of our ancestors that without at least one of them the life of a man of position could hardly have been deemed complete." Both robberies occurred on the same day, September 6th,

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once at Westminster and once at Hatcham, "near the foul oak." Chaucer lost nearly £20 of public funds, besides his horse and other things; but he seems to have been held blameless, for he was not required to repay the money. When this could happen so near London we may imagine the dangers besetting travellers in the open country, and understand the necessity for an armed escort to men worth pillaging.

Among other documents referring to Chaucer's life in London one recently came to light showing that a certain Cecilia Chaumpagne, in 1380, signed a bond of release promising not to prosecute him for carrying her off. Professor Lounsbury points out that for any criminal act this release could not have been legal, and reminds us that it was not uncommon, not only then but for many years later, to carry off heiresses in order to marry them. Professor Lounsbury believes, therefore, that Chaucer was merely the accessory to an

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

attempted elopement; and this seems to be justified by the fact that Chaucer was never held in higher estimation than in the years immediately succeeding this occurrence.

It would be convenient to defer the mention of these happenings until they could be brought out one by one in connection with the poet's literary life. But, unfortunately, the dates of his writings cannot be fixed with sufficient certainty to tell Chaucer's whole life in a single direct narrative. Some of his poems were in his hands for several years, and so it is easier to treat the events of his life separately and then to refer back to them when speaking of the composition of the poems.

We shall therefore try in this chapter to note briefly the main happenings that took place during the rest of the poet's life, and shall then take up his works and the topics suggested more directly by them, including in the later chapters such events as belong



## *Chivalry—Official Life*

more especially to the influences affecting his writings.

Chaucer's business life in London, from 1374 to 1400, covered the period of the death of Edward III, the whole reign of Richard II, and two years of the reign of Henry IV. The Black Prince died in 1376, Edward III in 1377, and Richard came to the throne in the same year. Richard's reign was anything but a glorious time for England. The French and Spaniards were supreme at sea, and often attacked the English coasts—they invaded the Isle of Wight and burned Hastings, Poole, Portsmouth, and other towns, being only now and then repulsed by the people under some brave nobleman or churchman. Even the clergy were armed, and fought bravely. The Scots also sent vessels against England, and found no resistance until a brave London merchant named Philpot raised a force, defeated them, and for his reward was rebuked by the government!

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

Money was needed, and a heavy poll-tax was imposed. This the commoners resisted, and then came Wat Tyler's rebellion—about which you may read in Morris's stirring story, "A Dream of John Ball." This John Ball was a priest, whom Froissart calls "mad"; but Green, the historian, says of him: "'Mad,' as the landowners held him to be, it was in the preaching of John Ball that England first listened to a declaration of the natural equality and rights of man. . . . A spirit fatal to the whole system of the Middle Ages breathed in the popular rhyme which condensed the levelling doctrine of John Ball:

“ ‘ When Adam delved and Eve span

Who was then the gentleman? ’ ”

But while Jack Straw, Wat Tyler, and their fellows were, with axes and staves and long bows, trying to conquer their rights, the rights preached to them by this "mad priest"—while Wycliffe was making in every way his protest against the corrup-

## *Chivalry—Official Life*

tions and the errors of the Church, sending out his "poor preachers," translating the Bible, writing his arguments—Chaucer was, it may be unconsciously, doing work even more effective against the same abuses.

Chaucer's poems, considered as agencies in the reform of Church and State, have been compared to an acid that slowly, almost imperceptibly, destroys what it attacks. His satire was not fierce; he wrote in good humor, and with a kindly tolerance that hardly awakened resentment in those classes whose failings he held up to ridicule. But what he said was remembered, and it remained in the minds of his readers gently to convince.

Whether or not Cervantes smiled chivalry away, the types created by Chaucer brought to all a realization of the failings in the classes he so truthfully depicted; and the same forces that were aroused against the more violent reformers were powerless against the pen of the poet.

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

In 1396 occurred the rejoicings over the marriage of Richard II to the little princess of France, who, at eight years old, had replied to the king's ambassadors: "If it please God, and my lord and father, that I shall be Queen of England, I shall be well pleased thereat: for I have been told that I shall then be a great lady."

So Froissart records. And later he tells of the marriage in the Church of St. Nicholas at Calais on All Saints' Day, of the great feasting that followed, the voyage to Dover in three hours, of the reception of the little queen into London, her stay at the Tower, the pomps and ceremonies that attended her through the streets of London, and her reception at Westminster. Then there was a great tournament held at Smithfield between forty knights and squires in the February following, of which notice was sent by heralds to Scotland and beyond the sea. For this tournament Chaucer prepared the lists.

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And Strutt, writing of "English Sports and Pastimes," relates that during merry-makings the apprentices of London danced before their masters' doors, and he notes that after Richard's coronation dinner the lords and ladies gave the rest of the evening to dancing; and we may be sure that on the occasion of the wedding London was in gala dress for several days at least. Chaucer, being forty-two, is more likely to have been merely a spectator than active in the spectacles and sports; but so brilliant were the costumes and so rich the display of color and lights that his artistic sense must have been delighted.

*9/10/1392*  
*Chaucer 56*  
*1340-42 = 1382*  
*Jan 14 1382*

In or about 1385 it is believed that the poet gave up his home over Aldgate and took a residence at Greenwich, where he lived until 1399, fourteen years; in the year before his death he leased a house at Westminster, upon the site now occupied by Henry VII's chapel, and there remained until his death, October 25, 1400

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

—the date once recorded on his tombstone in the Abbey. At the time of Dryden's burial it is said that this tombstone was cut in two to mend the pavement; and if this be so one is tempted to inquire whether it would not be worth while to seek for the pieces and have them carefully examined in the hope of finding some helpful dates or particulars.

Two years before Chaucer's death is set the beginning of the happenings in Shakespeare's "Richard II," and the play ends not long after the end of Chaucer's life; so in reading it we see a picture of Chaucer's times as drawn by Shakespeare.

In considering the writing of the poems mention will be made of those intervals of office-holding and reversals of fortune that had direct influence upon the work of the poet, for to note them here would make repetition necessary.

The essential thing to remember about Chaucer's life in the government service is

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that, beginning in 1370, at about the age of thirty, he remained almost uninterruptedly at work in the city of London, except for a few foreign journeys. What was important to the citizens of London was important to him; what they saw and knew, he may have seen or known. His love of nature—of which he gives ample proof—was that of a city business-man with only brief time to give to the outdoor world.

This was in some ways an advantage to him. His outings were during the milder seasons. He knew little, apparently, of what winter meant to the mediæval peasant—the scant food, the freezing, bitter cold, the difficulty of keeping alive the farm animals, the gloomy darkness of their huts, the filth of life in-doors, the impossibility of cleanliness. Of this life wrote Langland, but to Chaucer it remained remote.

The personal life of Chaucer is mainly inference, but the poet we may know as intimately as we will.

## CHAPTER IX

### WHAT CHAUCER READ AND WHAT HE KNEW

CONSIDERING how long Chaucer held offices in the public service it might be thought there would be plenty of documents existing in his handwriting. But careful search has failed to bring any to light, though it will be remembered that by the terms of his appointment he was required to keep the records in his own writing. "Someone who knew the records thoroughly," writes a correspondent to the London *Athenæum*, "has systematically picked out all Chaucer's work," and it is, every scrap, missing. When, how, or why this was done no one knows.

It is hoped that, instead of being stolen, the records have been put away among the



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mass of papers belonging to the English government; and, if so, they may at a later day come to light. At all events, there is a pleasant sense of mystery in their disappearance. Perhaps some admirer of the poet wished to preserve every particle of his handwriting; perhaps, with a thousand other valuable mementos, they may have been destroyed in the great fire of London. We must console ourselves for the loss of facts by the pleasure to be found in trying to solve the problems of the poet's life and works.

For there are puzzles to be solved in regard to the writings as well as in the biography. We have no sure test to determine what is Chaucer's and what is not, as will be learned by any who will read the great number of books setting forth the views of this scholar and that critic upon disputed pieces.

Objection is sometimes made to using the imagination in filling the gaps in our

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knowledge of Chaucer and his life, but it is either that or nothing. The certainties about the poet could be compressed into a single printed page if we confine ourselves to the facts concerning him directly.

But as to his times, there are undoubted records enough. We know what writers existed before him or with him, and we have specimens of their work by which to judge of them. There were men who put the Scriptures into metrical form—such as Richard Rolle; others, already referred to, who enlivened historical chronicles by poetical touches; and there were satirical poets, like Langland. The beginning of “The Vision of Piers Plowman” will show the alliterative form used by Langland, and will indicate how different was the construction of Chaucer’s rhyming verse; indeed, the men belonged to different schools of verse:

“ In a summer season  
When soft was the sun,

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I shoop me into shrouds  
As I a sheep were;  
In habit as a hermit  
Unholy of werkes,  
Went wide into the world  
Wonders to hear;  
Ac on a May morwening  
On Malvern hills,  
Me befel a ferly  
Of fairy, me thought."

This extract will serve to show that Chaucer had not adopted English fashions in his verse-making. Chaucer, as Lowell points out, began as imitator and translator, and invented little. The American critic gives four principal sources from which the Englishman drew—the Latins, the Troubadours, the Trouvères, and the Italians. By the Latins is meant such as Ovid and Virgil, with whom Chaucer was well acquainted, a few others being now and then mentioned, and among prose-writers Boethius, whose "Consolations of

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Philosophy" he translated, and Seneca. Chaucer's scholarship was rather that of a general reader than that of a deep student, and he makes blunders now and then in recalling the work of classic writers.

The Troubadours, the singers of romantic love-poetry, were of the south of France, and their verse was cast in artificial forms; the Trouvères, the poets of the more northern regions of France, were putting their own times into verse, giving "voice to real and not merely conventional emotions."

The characters of these two schools of French poetry, both of which strongly influenced Chaucer, are well discussed by Lowell in his essay on "Chaucer," where he asserts that it was through the Normans that "the English mind and fancy, hitherto uncouth, were first infused with the lightness, grace, and self-confidence of Romance literature." And it is hardly too much to say that Chaucer opened the chan-

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nel that brought this new influence into English literature.

The Italian influence on Chaucer was mainly that of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. What Dante was, a thousand books have told and are still telling. Yet it can hardly be better said than in Lowell's words: "With Dante, life represented the passage of the soul from a state of nature to a state of grace; and there would have been almost an even chance whether (as Burns says) the *Divina Commedia* had turned out a song or a sermon but for the wonderful genius of its author, which has compelled the sermon to sing and the song to preach." And then Lowell draws a parallel and contrast between Dante and the English poet, showing that with Chaucer all morals are incidental—the main thing being the pictures of life and of character.

From Boccaccio Chaucer helped himself freely, more freely than from any other

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poet. The "Knight's Tale" in the "Canterbury Tales" is based upon a poem of Boccaccio's; so is "Troilus and Criseyde," while others of Chaucer's poems contain references to passages and translations of the work of the Italian, and still further indebtedness is asserted.

From Petrarch Chaucer derived the story of Griselda, and a part of the "Monk's Tale"; and Professor Lounsbury argues that, since Chaucer never mentions Boccaccio by name, and ascribes some of that Italian's writing to Petrarch and another, Lollius, it may have been that Chaucer knew Boccaccio's poems without knowing the author's name—a thing quite possible in those days of manuscript circulation—and believed Petrarch to be their author. Other critics believe that Chaucer while in Italy, in 1373, visited Florence and there met Boccaccio. For in that very year a chair or professorship for the study of Dante had been established in the Univer-

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sity of Florence, and Boccaccio received the appointment, being then an old man of sixty.

As for Dante, he died before the birth ✓ of Chaucer, and that Chaucer knew and admired his works is known by many mentions of this greatest Italian; while Lydgate, a successor and follower of Chaucer, asserts that Chaucer wrote "Dante in English." How much influence Dante exerted upon the works of the English poet is disputed, but we may rest satisfied with the knowledge that there was considerable in- ✓debtedness in matters of style and treatment.

The reader of "Chaucer" will find throughout references to events and personages of the siege of Troy, and some note of the exploits of Alexander the Great, of Charlemagne, and of Arthur and his knights. These subjects were popular in the Middle Ages, and were widely known through long-winded romances.

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The Trojan heroes and their brave deeds were favorite topics with Chaucer, probably because he knew they would be welcome to his hearers.

Even those authorities already mentioned will show that the English poet was well read in the literature of his time; and in addition to them might be named a small library of books and authors much less known to us. It would serve no purpose to copy here the list that students have drawn up. It can be found in special articles on the sources of Chaucer's works; but we are convinced by the mere array of names that wherever an unusual book was to be found the English poet dipped eagerly into it, while with the books all knew—such as the Bible—Chaucer showed the fullest familiarity. He was, if not a close student, a thoroughly well-read and well-equipped man.

While loving literature, Chaucer was alive to all the science of his period, and



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convinces us that he had an intelligent interest in all that went on about him. Besides his treatise on the astrolabe, which he illustrated with drawings for the benefit of his little son, he shows otherwise an acquaintance with astronomy and astrology, introduces an alchemist into the "Canterbury Tales," giving full particulars of his magic art, and here and there in his poems shows by a shrewd remark that he was no inattentive listener to the theories of men of science and scholars.


Thus, in one place he speaks of the earth as "This wide world which that men say is round"; and though he puts the speech into the mouth of the Franklin, yet it is spoken not as questionable but as a matter of course; and this was more than a century before the days of Columbus. Possibly the word is used for circular, for the maps of the time show the world in this shape, with Jerusalem in the centre, and a neat ocean fitting smoothly and

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evenly around the circumference. The Mediterranean ran exactly across the middle, with a part extending downward. Make a round O and a T inside of it and you will have the mediæval idea of the map of the world. In another poem there is a discussion of how the sound-waves go through the air; in others we have natural history topics and the study of mathematics, spoken of with ease and familiarity.

Altogether, Chaucer's knowledge of the science of his times was creditable, and goes well with our general impression of his attainments. He makes no pretence to scholarship or deep learning, and speaks of scientific doctrines in the tone of a man of the world, a general reader; yet, like Shakespeare, Chaucer seems to have read with intelligence and interest whatever came in his way, and to have retained with fair accuracy the results of his reading.

2 The reign of Edward III has by many authorities been considered one of Eng-



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land's great periods, and in the pages of history the mighty expeditions of Edward to France, the battles of Crécy and Poitiers, the taking of Calais, the heroism of the Black Prince, the captivity of King John of France, take up much space and afford historians many a chance for sounding words; and yet, now we can look back to those times after five centuries, we know that there was more of England's future depending upon the quiet, thoughtful, kindly citizen, Geoffrey Chaucer, than upon all Edward's exploits.

While Edward and his son were warring against the neighbor kingdom to retain what was not worth keeping, and what was, in spite of their brave deeds, to be irrevocably lost, Chaucer was bringing to England a treasure destined to be eternal. For the English poet brought from France and from Italy the seeds of a great literature. He learned the essential principles of the art that was to give us Shakespeare,

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Spenser, Milton, Tennyson—the creators of the only wealth we all share, and shall share so long as it has any value to us and our descendants.

And this is nothing but a plain statement of fact. Art is not a matter of individual creation. Without his masters and his forerunners no poet, no artist can exist. Literature is a growth, a vast structure in whose making all writers have a hand. If the ancient writers seem to stand alone, it is only because the history of their times is unknown. Before Homer and Dante and Chaucer there were countless busy men, without whom the great poets could not have been what they became. And as one generation of writers pass away they leave behind them that which will, soon or late, produce the work of their successors.

Chaucer was so placed and so constituted that he became the chief means of bringing into England the charms of the

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poesy of France and of Italy; and none of Edward's conquests meant so much to Englishmen and to Americans as Chaucer's victories in the peaceful fields of literature.

There has been much discussion over the questions whether the English poet ever had a personal meeting with Petrarch ✓ or with Boccaccio; but, after all, these questions are of minor importance. What does concern us is not at all doubtful. We know that Chaucer read and appreciated and learned to value the poems of the great Italian writers; that from them he taught himself to know good poetry, and to write good poetry in the English tongue—in that dialect of his own and of the English court which was to be the speech of millions throughout the globe.

We have seen from the events of his life what manner of man he was. We have seen that he escaped the influences that might have narrowed him, and might have cramped his verse into a form and

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mold that would have confined it to his own times. He was not a poet of the church, caring only to teach; not a poet of the chivalry that had already passed its prime; not merely a reformer, to make his verse a political weapon; but he was a broad-minded, unprejudiced gentleman of England, with sympathy for all the men and women who in their various ways found their lives worth living.

Chaucer loved books, as he confesses, but he did not shut his eyes to the world around him. He found virtue worthy of his praise, but he could not prevent a human sympathy for the sinner. He exposed fraud and trickery, but it was with a smile rather than with bitter upbraiding.

In learning the skill of the Italians, Chaucer did not forget the natural kindliness of the French, and to both he added a quality that either was or has become especially English—the quality of common-sense, or simplicity. He has no false dig-

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nity, no such conceit as renders him unapproachable. He wins the affection of his readers; and this it is that has caused his work to be cherished and has in the centuries since his death assured him always those friends who keep his memory green and his verse alive. Happy is the poet whose readers love him, for this is what gives immortality, even to those of lesser rank.

This personal affection takes various forms. Toward Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, there is a reverence which prevents perfect affection; but Horace, Chaucer, Herrick, Scott, invite intimacy by their kindliness, and we come nearer to them.

Chaucer's broad, human spirit saved him also from becoming only an English reflection of those foreign masters whom he admired. He found good in Dante, in Boccaccio, in the Troubadours, in the Trouvères; but he was narrowed by none. Dante's solemnity, Boccaccio's lightness of

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touch, the Troubadours' artificiality, the Trouvères' ruggedness, he seems to have found not wholly to his taste, for while he used suggestions derived from each he adopted none of his models as sole and infallible guide.

Even where he is writing in some set style Chaucer is apt now and then to show his impatience of it. He will pause in the middle of a long story to inform the reader that it is tiresome, and he wishes it were done.

In short, Chaucer has humor. He finds it impossible to be stiff and to keep up a pose, as a man without humor so readily can do. His humor seems to us very modern, perhaps because so little of ancient humor found its way into literature. There are few things more delicious than the interrupting of certain stories in the "Canterbury Tales," because they are stupid; as where Chaucer himself is interrupted by "Mine Host," because his "Tale of Sir



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Thopas" is unbearably slow, whereupon the tale remains intentionally a fragment.

Chaucer's attitude toward the men of his time, so far as it is revealed by his poems, is that of an observer rather than a partisan or hero-worshipper. The portraits he has drawn were made with so much fairness that they never aroused resentment. The types he has described were strongly characterized, but were never unfairly caricatured; and therefore his works have never been considered unfair presentations. This has helped to make them popular, and thereby increased their influence.

And here again we may sum up our conclusion by saying that Chaucer was a man of letters rather than satirist, reformer, or moralist.

## CHAPTER X

### HIS WRITINGS, AND WHAT THEY CONTAIN

THERE is no such exactness in the dates of Chaucer's various works that we may give to each a definite place in his life. A few poems are in celebration of certain events, or contain passages that seem to fix their time; but in regard to most we can only put them generally into three great periods, as has been done by the German scholar, Ten Brink, who divides the poet's work into classes according to the influences under which the poems were composed.

The first class is called that of French influence, and extends from his earliest work to the time of his sojourn in Italy in 1373. The second, that of Italian influence, extends to about 1389, or the poet's fiftieth year. The third, the period of full

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maturity, covers the eleven years remaining.

These divisions are, of course, merely helps to the student, and do not indicate a complete change in style at the dates given. It is true, however, that taken broadly the poet's work shows three great varieties, and these we may study separately.

In the first period we find Chaucer trying his powers as a young writer by translating and imitating the works of those who were most admired. Much of his work of this time is thought to be lost, since writers of his own day speak of a great number of poems written in the artificial style of the French, and we know of very few. There is, however, one long poem of the time preserved.

This is the "Romance of the Rose," which Chaucer translated from the French, and of which we have a considerable part, if we may trust those who have most carefully studied the question. The original

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was an allegory, introducing such characters as Avarice, Sorrow, Idleness, who aid or oppose the hero, "Lover," in his attempt to reach the enchanted rose. The "Pilgrim's Progress" is to the religious life what these allegories were to the romantic, and to us retains an interest these have lost.

The romance begins by telling of a poet's dream, wherein he sees a beautiful garden, enclosed about with a wall, whereon are emblematic pictures of personified qualities, which paintings are described in full. To the garden the poet is admitted by "Ydelnesse," and meets with "Sir Mirthe," "Curtesye," and other characters, and the poem is made up mainly of long discourses that to modern readers are insufferably dull and meaningless.

It is hard for us to understand how anyone ever had patience to listen to the more than twenty thousand lines of the French original. Even in Chaucer's translation there is hardly enough wheat to reward

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one for seeking through the chaff. There is no reason why anyone but a student of Chaucer should trouble to read more than selected extracts of the tedious "Romance of the Rose." Some of the descriptions of the paintings on the wall contain touches to repay the reader, and a few of these will convince one whether he cares to read more of the translation—the chances being that, without special purpose, the reader will not care to go far.

The poem known as "Chaucer's A. B. C." has a musical beauty that will make it delightful to the reader. It is a free translation or paraphrase of the work of a Cistercian monk, of whom Professor Lounsbury says: "Once in about every score of years he is regularly discovered as the source from which Bunyan derived his far more famous production"; for this monk wrote a "Pilgrimage of the Soul," not unlike, in idea, Bunyan's allegory. This pilgrimage was in three parts, and from

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one of them is taken "Chaucer's A. B. C.," or "Prayer to the Virgin Mary," each stanza beginning regularly with the letters of the alphabet.

Besides this little device, the form of rhyming is noticeable. It is French in form, and the same he used in the "Monk's Tale" and several other pieces. The poem is considered one of his finest short pieces—being musical, elevated in style, pure in sentiment. But it is hardly long enough for the reader to see the poet at his best.

The "Book of the Duchess" is written in memory of Blanche, wife of John of Gaunt (meaning Ghent). Her death was in 1369, and so the poem is supposed to be nearly of that date. It is often printed under the title "The Dream of Chaucer" or "The Death of Blanche"; but the first of these names must not be confused with "Chaucer's Dream," a poem by another hand, but sometimes ascribed to Chaucer in early editions of his works. Like the

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"Romance of the Rose," this also is told in the form of a dream. The poet meets a dog, and is led to a knight clad in black (one of the earliest instances of black worn as mourning), who tells the sorrowful story of the loss of his beloved wife, and devotes himself to her praise.

In the "Book of the Duchess" the reader will find proof of Chaucer's power. The beginning tells the tale of "Seys and Alcyone," which the poet was reading in order to put himself to sleep; and the story concluding with a deep sleep, wherein Alcyone sees a vision of her husband, the poet most humorously offers a bribe to Morpheus, the god of sleep, for as deep a slumber—the bribe being a "feather-bed of down from white doves" and the richest bed-clothing, besides a promise of gilding his bed-room and hanging it with tapestry! The bribe seems effective, for the desired sleep follows, and therein occurs the dream which is the subject of the poem.

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Modern readers will find most pleasure in Chaucer's picture of the May morning as the dreamer imagined it—a brightly painted little miniature, rich in color and in tone, with its bird-songs; its stained-glass windows, showing Hector, Priam, Paris, Helen, and Lavinia; the sunbeams glancing through; the clear, cloudless, blue sky, and the morning air “neither cold nor hot.” Then comes a hunting-scene, blowing horns, eager hounds, and galloping horsemen, from which the “whelp that fawned me as I stood” leads the poet to the bereaved knight.

The knight's tribute to the lost one is natural and beautiful, and though there are here and there bits of pedantry and tricks of the French school, there is throughout a wholesome tenderness of tone, a graphic painting of an English woman of the best sort, and an ease of style that will ever attract readers.

Some critics have objected that the poem



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is awkwardly ended; but it seems to me that the abrupt ending after the words "She is dead!" is masterly. An inferior poet would have dragged on to a weak and nerveless ending, forgetting Hamlet's thought—"The rest is silence." Truly, after the knight's words there can be nothing said; and that Chaucer wisely closes with the few necessary lines that end his dream is enough to prove that he already had in him the essential qualities of a great poet.

The story of "Seys and Alcyone" is referred to in the introduction to the prologue to the "Man of Law's Tale" ("Canterbury Tales") as written in the poet's youth; so the version of it included in "The Book of the Duchess" may be a rewriting of an earlier complete form, since Chaucer was certainly nearly thirty at the time of the death of Blanche.

To this same period, that of French influence, are assigned two other poems that

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seem to have been included later among the "Canterbury Tales"—the "Life of St. Cecilia" and parts of the "Monk's Tale," so they need not be here mentioned further.

After the sojourn in Italy critics find some changes in style. To this period belong "The Complaint of Mars," "Troilus and Criseyde," the translation of "Boethius" in prose, "The Parliament of Fowls," and "The House of Fame," and certain minor pieces. Besides the change in style, there is direct taking of plots and incidents, chiefly from Boccaccio or from Petrarch's Latin versions of Boccaccio's stories. Like Shakespeare, Chaucer had no scruple in taking material that suited his purposes, and in making use of it as he chose. But in using the aid of the Italians, the important matter is that Chaucer felt the grace and ease of their verse, and in making his English poems upon the same themes sought and won some of the Italian music, though he rightly complains that

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English does not lend itself so easily to rhyme and metre as does Italian. The subjects themselves are not especially pleasing to us. As Chaucer grew in power he abandoned the conventional stories of heathen gods and goddesses; but at this time mythology, classic lore, and allegory make much of his work very stupid reading to us who care so much less for all these things.

“The Complaint of Mars,” for example, is tiresome, short as it is; “The Parliament of Fowls” is full of delightful passages, so different from “The Complaint of Mars” that it is hard to believe the same hand wrote both. The Fowls are choosing their mates on St. Valentine’s Day, in the presence of the goddess Nature, when a rivalry arises among three eagles who have chosen the same mate. After various birds—the goose, the cuckoo, the dove—have given their opinions in characteristic ways, Nature decides that the decision shall rest with

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the eagle they all have chosen, and she postpones her decision for a year.

This plot is slight enough, but it is supposed to be an allegory of the courtship of Anne of Bohemia by Richard II and two rivals, and therefore to have been composed about 1381—the year of Tyler's rebellion.

From the absurdity of the speeches made by some of the birds called upon for opinions, we may suspect that one purpose of the poem was to poke fun at some of those who favored the marriage of Anne to the foreign noblemen; but the ending of the story in a year's delay would suggest that a sequel was intended. To modern readers the plot matters little; the charm of the piece lies in the treatment, for which the poem is well worth reading.

The long and dull translation of "Boethius on the Consolation of Philosophy" is not likely to attract modern readers, though his work was deservedly popular before

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and after Chaucer's times. Gibbon speaks of Boethius as "the last of the Romans whom Cato or Cicero could have acknowledged as their countryman." Born about 475 A.D., a Roman of high birth, he was at first prosperous and prominent, being a consul and seeing both his sons in the same office; but later he was imprisoned, lost his property, and was put to death. His "Consolations" were written in prison.

To the Middle Ages Boethius was both martyr and philosopher, and was long revered as teacher and authority in many branches of learning. But excellent as his work was and is, it is not likely to be read by modern readers—to whom the long treatises that delighted our ancestors are a mental weariness.

The translation, made by Chaucer from about his thirty-eighth to his forty-first year, marks the beginning of more serious writings by the English poet, such as "Troilus and Criseyde," "The House of

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Fame," "The Legend of Good Women," and the "Canterbury Tales"—to name the longer pieces.

"Troilus and Criseyde" is based not upon Homer's story of the Trojan war, but is, as Ward says in the volume of "English Men of Letters" that he wrote on Chaucer, "an English reproduction of a Latin translation of a French poem," though it is not an exact following of any of these. Boccaccio's poem "Filostrato" was the chief source, and suggested about one-third of Chaucer's poem, directly or indirectly.

To show the difference of critical opinion, Professor Lounsbury quotes Sir Walter Scott as calling this "a long and somewhat dull poem," while Rossetti declares it "perhaps the most beautiful narrative poem of considerable length in the English language."

Where such doctors differ, the readers must choose which to follow.

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Chaucer himself certainly found the tragic story gloomy, for he inserts near the end a prayer that before he dies the writer may "make some comedy." And with this aspiration in mind, we find him adopting a lighter treatment of his next subject.

"The House of Fame" commences, as do its predecessors, with a dream. So does "The Legend of Good Women." This device seems to have been the regular form in which to cast poems wherein the unreal is treated. It is abandoned when Chaucer, freeing himself from all bonds, awakes to realities in the "Canterbury Tales."

The dream in "The House of Fame" takes the poet to a temple of Venus, where first he reads the story of Æneas and Dido, and then recounts other tales of false lovers. Leaving this temple, he is carried by Jove's eagle to the House of Fame—the flight through the air being wonderfully described—and there entering beholds the great men of all time, in their

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classes. Here were musicians, magicians—the minstrel and the juggler were nearly allied in Chaucer's mind—heralds, and the historians, poets, and writers. Among them are Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Lucian, Claudian.

Dame Fame is now described as awarding reputations good and bad, according to the motive with which work has been done, and according to the requests made her. This whole scene is most humorously written, and richly repays the reader.

From the Temple of Fame the poet goes to view the "Labyrinth of Dædalus," a representation of Rumor, or false fame—in short, the Temple of Gossip, described as formless, whirling, never-resting. And then—the fragment ends. The poem remains unfinished. But no reader of Chaucer should neglect it.

"The Legend of Good Women" is introduced by a prologue telling of Chaucer's meeting with the god of love, who charges



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the poet with disloyalty in having told the stories of women who were faithless to their lovers instead of true. Chaucer obtains forgiveness through the intercession of Alceste, revered as the type of faithful wives, and as a penance is told to write of good women.

This introduction serves to bind together a number of stories relating the fates of Cleopatra, Thisbe (our old friend of "Midsummer-Night's Dream"), Queen Dido, Lucrece, Ariadne, and others. The poem was never finished.

The prologue, besides showing that the whole was to be presented to Queen Anne, is valuable as containing a list of Chaucer's more important works up to this time.

Of nineteen stories of "Good Women" promised, only nine were written, so far as we know; but in the prologue is the best of this production. The cause of its sudden ending is unknown; but since it was about this time that we find the poet pledg-

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ing his pensions, it has been supposed that he was oppressed by poverty. Other causes have been suggested, such as the death of his wife, which occurred about this time, or the beginning of the "Canterbury Tales." In the prologue to "The Legend of Good Women" there is mention of two poems that afterward made part of the stories told by Canterbury pilgrims—the knight's tale of "Palamon and Arcite" and a "Life of St. Cecilia," that was transferred to the later collection as "The Second Nun's Tale"; and these, like "Seys and Alcyone," may have appeared first as separate, complete poems. It seems reasonable that a plan so large as that for the "Canterbury Tales" may well have caused the poet to give up the writing of minor poems in which he found less interest; and since this greatest work was never finished, the earlier works also remained incomplete. Then, too, it is not impossible that there may have been more of his work

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than has come down to us. The first collected edition of his poems did not appear until 1532, and there was a century at least during which much of his work may have been lost.

The poems mentioned in this chapter are of admitted authenticity, and the omission of "The Court of Love," "The Flower and the Leaf," "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale," and "Chaucer's Dream" is due to their exclusion from his works by critics of the highest rank. There can be no objection to reading them, so long as it is remembered that they probably are not his.

Of important poems there remain only the "Canterbury Tales."

As these are by far the most interesting to us they deserve more space, especially since they enable us to see the times of Chaucer more intimately than any other agency can do. As has been pointed out, the poems already spoken of do not at-

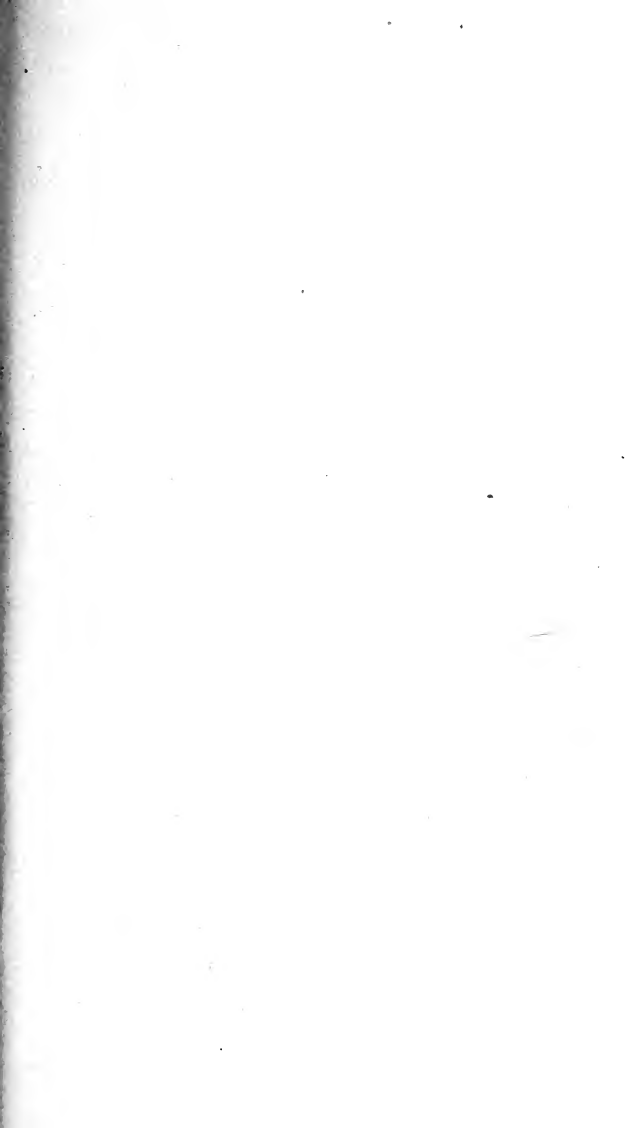
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tempt to picture the times directly, and they are more or less affected by the inclusion of unrealities, or by the models upon which they were formed.

But in the "Canterbury Tales" the plan permitted more freedom and more range, and it will therefore give us the best idea of Chaucer's times to note the features of the pictures the poet has therein drawn for us.

"Chaucer," wrote Lowell, "is the first who broke away from the dreary traditional style, and gave not merely stories but lively pictures of real life as the ever-renewed substance of poetry."

It is in the "Canterbury Tales" that we shall find a gallery of these pictures—the life of his times and the life of all times.





## THE CANTERBURY PILGRIMS.

From a mural painting by Robert V. V. Sewell.

## CHAPTER XI

### "THE CANTERBURY TALES"

ONE passes, in coming from his earlier poems to the famous pilgrimage, out of an old museum into the freshness and light of a crisp spring morning. The first lines of the Prologue affect one as does the dawn of day in early spring. Chaucer must have written them on some April or May morning such as he is so fond of describing.

No doubt it was the minstrels' fashion to sing of the springtide, but even in following the mode set by other poets Chaucer gives one a sense of reality and truth that they lack. Edmund C. Stedman says: "Chaucer for the most part tells old tales with a new and English beauty," and is "like a child that roams afield in May."

But while the stories told by the pilgrims

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to Canterbury are retellings of old tales, the framework of the whole poem is new. Since poetry was first put together various devices have been invented to bind its flowers into a single posy, and that chosen by Chaucer is one of the most pleasing.

Boccaccio sends his story-tellers into a retired garden far from a plague-stricken city, and though he surrounds them with wholesome natural objects, the reader who can forget the miseries of the deserted city is fortunate. In the "Arabian Nights" the charming stories of Scheherazade are devices to save a loved sister from the executioner. But Chaucer brings his personages together on a spring day, shows them bent upon a pious mission, and yet one involving pleasant picnicking, conducts them gaily through a beautiful country, and lets no suggestion of tragedy mar our enjoyment of their friendly companionship.

Longfellow's "Tales of a Wayside Inn" spring from a similar meeting, but the



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foundation for his set of poems is much slighter, as befits the stories themselves. Besides, Longfellow was the later writer, and writes in confessed imitation of Chaucer.

Short as is the Prologue, there is little left untold in it. The shrine of Thomas à Becket was a popular object for the pilgrim journeys, for the road to it was safe, easily travelled, as roads went in those days, and the shrine was in the great cathedral city, itself well worth a visit.

That it was attractive to all classes we can understand; and though about a third of the pilgrims were connected with the Church, the rest fairly represent the secular world. Three, the knight, the squire, and their comrade the yeoman, were types of the military life that nourished chivalry and its supporters. Mercantile and professional life, trade and labor each had representatives; and all were, as is plainly said, fairly prosperous, and making the

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pilgrimage as much from pleasure as from a sense of duty. Chaucer speaks of "twenty-nine pilgrims," but there are more than this number, as the readers may see by counting those named in the Prologue, and then adding the Canon and his Yeoman, who join late in the journey, as told in the "Canon Yeoman's Prologue."

Canterbury was a busy commercial town, its cathedral renowned throughout England, its people famed for public spirit and independence. What could appeal more strongly to London's citizens than the ride thither, knowing it would confer upon them a certain odor of sanctity, and that they would meet upon the road many travellers going upon the same errand or returning?

No doubt parties were made up just as this one came together. The Tabard Inn at Southwark was a most convenient gathering-place. Built around an open court, the intending pilgrim had but to take his

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place upon one of its galleries and watch the coming of other travellers into the paved court below. Then, as Chaucer did, he could make acquaintance, and add himself to what seemed an attractive party.

Some critics have thought it unlikely that there should have been so little restraint among pilgrims whose social ranks were so different: that the knight and the ploughman should so freely consort together. But in those days the classes were so sharply divided by fixed barriers that there was little danger of mistake. Dress, manners, language—all marked the gentle from the churl, even while their methods of life were much the same; the barrier was impassable, though at times the superior condescended to familiarity or the inferior tried to presume upon kindness. Yet, though there remained a barrier, there was, as Matthew Browne points out, much more contact between the classes than in later times. The chase, war, castle-life,

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amusements — all brought together the gentles and those of low degree. Nowadays a nobleman wishing to be exclusive could live almost without a word to a fellow-being. Then, it would have been impossible.

Chaucer tells us that in the evening before the start he had spoken to everyone; and this shows there could have been no difficulty in making acquaintance. As pilgrims, too, they were all equal, and this may have caused a fellow-feeling that tended to bring them together. Certainly there could have been no formalities of introduction, for later in the poem we find that the innkeeper shows little knowledge of his companions' names or state except where their costumes help him in fixing their quality.

This Innkeeper was a real personage. Browne, in his "Chaucer's England," quotes from "Notes and Queries" a letter that shows that "Harvey Bailly, hostelry-

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keeper of Southwark, was in Parliament" at that time. And the Tabard Inn was in existence until about 1875, though it is doubtful what portion of the later building dated from Edward's reign. The site of it is known, and what Southwark was it is easy to understand.

Lying just outside of London, it was a true suburb, less strictly ruled and governed than the city, and therefore the resort of those whose presence in the city was for any reason unwelcome. Being on the roads connecting London with Canterbury and with Kent, it was a natural place for travellers to lodge, and so was well provided with inns, for the accommodation not only of pilgrims but of carters, merchants, minstrels, and wanderers of all sorts between the two cities. The Tabard Inn, one of the most popular and prosperous, no doubt made its owner a man of substance, well able to represent his shire in Parliament.

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Chaucer describes him as a big, masterful man, with bright eyes, sociable and kindly—after his guests had settled their bills, which it seems was customary after supper. He is the one to propose that stories shall be told, the best to win a supper; his plan being that each pilgrim shall tell four tales during the pilgrimage, two going, two returning.

Next morning, the after-supper agreement being confirmed, lots are drawn, and the Knight is appointed to tell the first story, as is proper in view of his position in the company.

The story he chooses is such as would be expected from a man of his traditions, a story of knighthood and women in distress. Duke Theseus, the old Greek hero, becomes changed into a representative of mediæval chivalry, and captures two young knights, Arcite and Palamon, whose rivalry for the love of Emelye makes the romantic basis for the tale—of which a

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large portion comes from Boccaccio's poem, "Teseide."

The reader of to-day will find much light upon the ways of Chaucer's days in the description of the tournament in the third part of the poem, the luxurious lists built up for the fray, upon the walls of which the poet has portrayed with a master's power pictures as vivid as they are brief:

"There saw I first the dark imagining  
Of felony, and all the compassing.  
The cruel ire, red as any gleede ;\*  
The pickpurse, and eke the pale drede ;†  
The smiler with the knife under the cloak ;  
The shepne ‡ burning with the black smoke ;  
The treason of the murdering in the bed  
The open war with woundes || all bi-bled."¶

Every form of tragic death is here suggested in a word or two, and with a strength few poets ever attain. And so with other subjects, in a long gallery of word-paintings.

\* Live coal. † Dread. ‡ Shed. || Wounds. ¶ Bloody.

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To these lists come the knights, as graphically depicted, and after a long discourse upon the prayers of Palamon and Arcite and Emelye to the heathen gods, we are present in the bustle and hubbub of the tournament—a masterly piece of descriptive writing—and see the battle lost and won.

But Chaucer must tell the story, and, indeed, all the stories. There is no profit in condensing them into a few dry sentences. We shall note only what information they give to help us in entering into the life of the times, and knowing the people of England five centuries ago. Besides, every reader of Chaucer's works knows that there are some of the tales told by the pilgrims which are better omitted. There can be no objection to plain speaking where it is required, but in works of imagination the world of events is wide enough and affords paths enough to avoid the rubbish heaps.



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After the telling of the Knight's romance the Miller, who is drunk, tells a story despite all efforts to restrain him; but there is no need that we should soberly rehearse the story of this drunken Miller. It will be enough to say that it presents pictures of town-life—the young scholar devoted to astrology, weather-wise, fond of playing on the harp; the carpenter who rents his rooms, and has a pretty, young wife, whose dress is carefully described. Chaucer herein gives an excellent idea of a young housewife's garb, and of her lively demeanor. We also have a portrait of a dandified young clerk, with curly yellow hair, dressed in red and white, and are told how he could "let blood, and clip and shave," being a sort of barber-surgeon, or write legal papers, as well as dance, sing, and play instruments. He even appears at times as an actor in the miracle-plays, or spectacles upon a high scaffolding in the town.

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These are the characters in the story of town life; and then the Reeve, being a carpenter and offended by the Miller's story about a fool carpenter, tells his own, and gives us sketches of country life, since his scene is a mill where two clerks come to have their corn ground. This story, too, is like an old Dutch painting of a village turmoil, and equally unsavory. But in it we have a portrait of a big, bullying miller, who carries a knife in his stocking and is ready for a fight or for robbing a customer; a companion-picture of his proud wife, brought up in a nunnery, daughter of the parson of the town; and their two children. All are strong, hearty, coarse folk, and nowise nice. And there is nothing in the story of their adventures tempting us to seek for light upon the life of the time. The Cook follows, but before he is fairly started we come to a note saying, "Of this Cook's tale maked Chaucer no more," and we get nothing beyond a hasty sketch of an

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idle apprentice who is discharged with the proverb, "Better is a rotten apple out of hoard than that it rot all the remenant" [remnant].

With the Cook's Tale are concluded the tales told on the first day of the pilgrimage.

This brings us to the Introduction to the Man of Law's Prologue, in which we find the Host fixing the very day and hour—the eighteenth of April, 1388, at ten o'clock—the very day of "Paul Revere's Ride," told in the "Tales of a Wayside Inn." Of course the actual date named by Chaucer, three hundred and eighty-seven years before, would correspond, in "new style," to the twenty-ninth of April, since eleven days were dropped when the calendar was corrected in September, 1752.

The lengths of the tree-shadows serve the Host for a timepiece, and the going of the day gives him occasion for moral remarks on the loss of time before he calls

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upon the Man of Law to entertain the company. The lawyer, after modestly saying that he cannot tell such tales as Chaucer told, and naming a few examples of that poet's work, himself recites one founded upon an old chronicle—the adventures of Constance, daughter of the Emperor of Rome, who escapes by her pious faith from many a grievous peril, and returns home to live “in virtue and in holy alms-deed.”

Here again, although the story is interesting and excellently told, reminding one of the “Arabian Nights” by the complication of its plot, there is little in it that could not be as well in any other time than Chaucer's. It belongs to the land of poesy where dates do not exist, and where all ages are equally at home.

To the proposal that the Parson shall tell his story next, the clergyman replies by rebuking the Host for an oath, and then the Sailor interposes with, “I smell a Lol-

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lard [Wycliffite] in the wind," and insists that there shall be no sermon preached. The Shipman's tale follows, and is of value as showing us a picture of the busy merchant of the time, immersed in commerce, with books and money about him in his counting-house, while his wife gets into trouble by extravagance in dress, and by borrowing to pay for her clothing.

We see in many of these stories that the clergy were held in evil esteem, and accused of abusing in every way their freedom of access to the homes of the citizens. It is of course natural that stories told to please a popular taste that was, to say the least, not particular, should dwell upon the vices and shortcomings of both churchmen and laymen. But so often is the monk, the friar, the pardoner, or the summoner made the doer of evil that one must admit there was reason for the reforms set afoot by Wycliffe and his followers. Certainly, if we are to take Chaucer's portrayals as

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just, we shall do little injustice by the conclusion that the wandering, thievish, scoundrelly churchmen of that day were like a swarm of vermin.

Even where there was probity, there was still superstition and fanaticism, as is seen in the Tale of the Prioress, who recounts the miracle of the coming to life of a Christian child, murdered by a Jew. It is a story like that of Hugh of Lincoln, who was then believed to have been slain by the Jews in a similar way. Such accusations were not infrequently made against this persecuted race, and goaded mobs to fury against them in times of popular tumult.

Next Chaucer is called upon, as described in the passage already quoted, relating to his personal appearance. He responds by the rhyming ballad of "Sir Thopas," in parody of those "gestes" popular in England at the time. The cheap jingle of the lines becomes, as it was meant

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to do, unbearably monotonous, and is at last stopped by the Host, who commands the poet to "tell in prose somewhat at the least in which there be some mirth or some doctrine." Chaucer yields, and tells the "Tale of Melibeus"—which, to a modern reader, is even duller in its long-winded prose than is Sir Thopas in its trotting rhyme.

But in Sir Thopas there are some particulars that interest us. We have a description of the knight and of his pursuits:

"He couldè hunt at wildè deer  
And ride a-hawking for riveer  
With grey goshawk on hand.  
Thereto he was a good archeer;  
Of wrestling was there none his peer  
Where any ram shall stand."

A ram was the usual prize in wrestling bouts, and in the description of the Miller we are told that he too was a winner of rams by wrestling. Next comes a little

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landscape and woodland scene, a meeting with a fierce giant, named "Oliphaunt," or Elephant, who throws stones from a "staff-sling," and finally the arraying of the knight for combat, with minute detail of what he wore—wearisome to the hearers, perhaps, but instructive to us.

The "Melibeus" is a free translation of a French version of a Latin treatise—a long, dull, moralizing prose-story that is of use only as proving that Chaucer's prose was clear and easy in style, and as showing that the fourteenth century had its full share of proverbial wisdom gathered from every source. But so dry is the treatise that Chaucer is commended for modesty in assigning this "Hobson's choice" to himself. We cannot see why such dull discourses as this "Melibeus" and the "Parson's Tale" were listened to by the Host and the Knight when they would not submit to "Sir Thopas" and the "Monk's Tale." We can only guess that it was



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thought improving to hear these sermon-izings, and no one dared revolt against them.

The Host's comment upon Melibeus is a humorous wish that his wife might have learned patience from it, whereas she is a shrew, eager to have him beat his knaves with "great clubbed staves," and urges him to slay those who fail to do her courtesy in church—saying he has no spirit and should "have her distaff and go spin." Incidentally, the Host remarks that they are approaching Rochester, which informs us that their journey is about half done.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE "CANTERBURY TALES"—THE PILGRIMS THEMSELVES

WITHOUT counting the very brief fragment "Sir Thopas," there are twenty-three Tales fairly completed. But this is a small part of those promised in the prologue, where each was to tell four, two on the journey out, two on the way home. The whole poem is incomplete, of course, but there is sufficient variety in the tales to indicate what the completed work would have been.

The Monk, continuing in the moral path chosen by Chaucer's "Melibeus," gives a long series of what were known as "Tragedies"—brief sketches in verse reciting the misfortunes of illustrious characters, serving in place of biographical no-

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tices. The poems are not of especial interest in any respect if we look at them only as readers, and Chaucer tells us that the Knight soon tires of the homilies, reminds the Monk that they all know the lesson he is teaching, and with the cordial seconding of the Host the Monk's Tale is stopped before they all fall asleep; and the Nuns' Priest, John, is invited to tell something that will "gladden their hearts."

The story of the Nuns' Priest is the charming little barnyard mock-heroic poem of Chanticleer and the Fox. Beginning with a sketch of the home of the poor widow who owns the fowls, we learn how the cock dreams of falling victim to a villainous fox, and then discusses with prudent Dame Pertelote, the hen, the value of dreams as omens, each wisely quoting learned authorities. The cock, being reassured, falls victim to the crafty fox, who flatters the bird into giving an exhibition of his crowing. The passage where Chan-

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Chanticleer performs is exquisitely written, and so are many other pictures in this wonderful tale—a most successful example of Chaucer's lighter style. The escape of Chanticleer from his enemy delights the reader, and altogether the Nuns' Priest is worthy of the praise he receives from his companions for his share in the story-telling.

This is supposed to end the stories told on the second day's journey.

Without the usual introduction comes the Physician's Tale—the story of Virginia, from Livy's history—the same made so familiar by Macaulay's "Lays of Ancient Rome." In this the portrait of Virginia is especially notable, but the telling of the tragic deed should be enough to convince any doubter of Chaucer's power to write in the highest style. The Host's comments show him deeply moved, but he reacts into his usual joking manner, and calls for something to take away the

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sad remembrance of the tragedy. The Pardoner is urged to tell a "merry tale," and then, because of objections from the "gentles," he agrees to tell a moral tale, prefacing it by getting a drink and a cake at an ale-house, and then by giving an account of his method of preaching—showing himself an arrant knave and confessed hypocrite. The story is upon a well-known plot, that of the rogues who fall out over a treasure they have found, and by treachery one to another are all slain. As a preface to the narrative, the Pardoner delivers a sermon on various vices, and as an epilogue vaunts the value of the pardons and relics he has to sell—like a very soul-insurance agent.

Rebuked by the foul-mouthed Host, a quarrel arises, which is ended by the intercession of the Knight, by whose intercession the Host and the Pardoner are brought to exchange the kiss of peace!

The deaf Wife of Bath follows, with

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her garrulous discourse on her experiences of five husbands, and with her story of the knight who carried out his promise to wed an old hag and then found her transformed into a beautiful young bride—an idea that has come down to our times in “Beauty and the Beast” and other fairytales.

The Wife of Bath was a great favorite with Chaucer, perhaps the character he believed the best he had drawn; and he refers to her in his “Envoy to Bukton,” advising his friend to read of her.

Two stories follow told in malice—the Friar striving to cast ridicule upon the Summoner, and the Summoner responding in kind. Both seem so expert at mud-throwing that lovers of cleanliness will do well to keep their distance, since there is little to be learned from either story beyond a knowledge how the poor were robbed by the “summoners,” or sheriffs of the ecclesiastics, and how the friars were

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often thieves and rascals as well as beggars. Despite the unsavory nature of the tales, we can see how they might please those who had learned to hate these wolves in sheep's clothing.

"Patient Griselda" is the story told by the Clerk, who gives due credit to Petrarch for the plot. It is this passage which makes critics believe that Chaucer records a personal meeting with the Italian poet, though it seems a very slight foundation. However, one might fairly ask whether the meeting would make any difference, one way or the other. An envoy, in which Chaucer moralizes on the rarity of Griseldas, forms an appendix; and then the Merchant, the Squire, and the Second Nun—who tells the legend of St. Cecilia—the Canon's Yeoman—who speaks of alchemists and their art—the Manciple, and Parson offer their share of entertainment.

The tales of the fourth and last day of the pilgrimage begin with the Squire's.

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It will be enough to characterize these stories briefly. The Merchant points the well-known moral against the marriage of age and youth—"January" and "May"; the Squire's subject is a mediæval story of magic, an Arabian Nights' wonder-tale; the legend of St. Cecilia is one of the regular lives of the saints; the Canon Yeoman's exposé of the tricks of a swindling alchemist is excellent in all respects; the Manciple gives a fable explaining how the crow came to be black, and then the Parson claims the right to preach.

The Parson's long sermon—the last of the collection that has come to us—is simply a sermon, and one is glad to know that Lowell prefers to believe it is not Chaucer's, especially as it concludes with a "recantation" by the poet of some of his very best work. Only conjectures can be made; but may it not be that this expression of repentance is a pious forgery, and that more than one of the missing Can-



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terbury Tales have been made away with? The missing "Cook's Tale" was once replaced by the story of "Gamelin," from another pen than Chaucer's we are told.

There is no possibility of denying that there are many passages in Chaucer's works that not only the enemies but the friends of the poet would wish never written. But the same is true in some degree of the classical writers in all lands, and those who are to study these writings must decide for themselves whether to avoid these portions. There is much of Chaucer that may be read with delight and without aversion, and the rest is like certain facts in nature—to be frankly avoided by those whom they offend, courageously met when a proper motive requires it.

There is more good and clean literature than can be read in a lifetime, and our tastes and principles must guide us in our reading. If we prefer Chaucer in selections, there are edited texts to be obtained

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without difficulty; and what is omitted from them is of secondary importance to the reader who wishes to know the poet only at his best.

Why is it, in view of the blemishes, the faults, the copying, that these "Canterbury Tales" have always been praised, cherished, studied, held to be one of the great treasures of English literature? It is of no use to deny that the "Canterbury Tales" are Chaucer's masterpiece and his monument. What makes them great?

One need but read them to be able to answer that question. They have a truth, a vitality, a reality that appeal to all of us. We come face to face with men and women of five hundred years ago, and know them as if we had mounted into the saddle and gone on the pilgrimage ourselves. We see them, hear the horses' hoofs, move on the road, halt, and listen as they do. We are even conscious that the pilgrims are more real than the per-

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sonages in their stories, though these do not lack distinctness. Longfellow's "Tales of a Wayside Inn" are charming, but compare his sketches of his tale-tellers with the pictures drawn by his mediæval forerunner.

Chaucer was a customs-official, Longfellow a professor in a great college, and yet—

Let us hear Longfellow first; and then Chaucer on the same subject:

“ A theologian from the school  
Of Cambridge on the Charles, was there;  
Skilful alike with tongue and pen,  
He preached to all men everywhere  
The gospel of the Golden Rule,  
The New Commandment given to men,  
Thinking the deed and not the creed,  
Would help us in our utmost need.  
With reverent feet the earth he trod  
Nor banished nature from his plan,  
But studied still with deep research  
To build the Universal Church,  
Lofty as is the love of God,  
And ample as the wants of man.”

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Elevating, scholarly, polished. Very excellent verse, though far from Longfellow at his best. Now let us hear Chaucer's lines:

“A good man was there of religioun,  
And was a poor parson of a town;  
But rich he was of holy thought and work;  
He was also a learned man, a clerk  
That Christès gospel truly wouldè preach,  
His parissheis devoutly would he teach.  
Benign he was, and wonder diligent,  
And in adversity full patiënt.  
And such he was y-provèd often sythes.  
Full loath were he to cursen for his tithes,  
But rather would he given, out of doubt,  
Unto his poorè parissheis about  
Of his off'ring, and eke of his substance.  
He could in little thing have suffisance.”

To be fair, let us stop here, since this portion is about equal in length to the extract from Longfellow. Now, which of these poets was thinking of theology, and which of the man he described? See which tells the most about his subject.

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Longfellow has only one line that even gives a hint about the "Theologian" himself—"With reverent feet the earth he trod"—and that line is a figure of speech; while Chaucer, in little more space, only six more words, tells us the man's character, disposition, practice, and theory. There is no doubt possible which is the better poetic, the better imaginative work.

Let us compare the two landlords—him of the Wayside Inn with Harry Bailly, of the Tabard. Here is all the descriptive part of Longfellow's lines:

"But first the landlord will I trace;  
Grave in his aspect and attire;  
A man of ancient pedigree,  
A Justice of the Peace was he,  
Known in all Sudbury as 'The Squire.' "

And here is Chaucer's equally brief sketch of a similar type:

"A seemly man our hostè was withal  
For to have been a marshall in a hall.

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A largè man he was, with eyen steep,\*  
A fairer burgess is there none in Cheap:  
Bold of his speech, and wise, and well y-taught,  
And of manhood him lackedè right naught."

Again it will be seen how much more is told by Chaucer. If you try to picture each, it will be seen at once how many details Chaucer has given. "Grave is his aspect and attire"—that is all Longfellow tells; it would fit any one of a thousand; and see the significance of Chaucer's words—"seemly," "bold of speech," "lacking naught of manhood"; while "grave" is all we have to set against them.

Only in Shakespeare will better portrait-painting be found—as in the "seven ages of man," the "Justice, with eyes severe and beard of formal cut," the soldier "full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard." Is not Chaucer a poet of the same nature? Tennyson can describe as forcibly as Chaucer, as is shown in his picture of the

\* Sharp.

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millar in "The Miller's Daughter," which Matthew Browne compares with Chaucer's descriptions of men of the same calling; but he prefers to elaborate rather than to say the one right thing and leave the phrase. Lowell, in his essay on Chaucer, quotes "a verse that makes us glance over our shoulder as if we heard a stealthy tread behind us." This is the line, already quoted from the Knight's Tale, describing a figure of Revenge:

"The smiler with the knife hid under the cloak."

In fact, to help the student of Chaucer to know his qualities, this essay of Lowell's should be the first thing read.

Meanwhile, it will be well to consider the characters introduced to us as taking part in the Canterbury pilgrimage. They divide naturally into a few groups, of which the first is the Knight and his company, he a lover of chivalry, gentle of speech, dignified and wise. A far-travelled

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veteran, he has just stepped ashore from his latest voyage, and in his armor-stained coat hastens to the shrine in fulfilment of some vow. From his interruption of the Monk's "Tragedies" we may conclude that he dislikes mournful subjects, having seen enough real woe to be impatient of fictitious troubles.

With him is his dandyish son, the Squire, in richly embroidered coat, an accomplished young blade of twenty years, full of jokes and songs, a serenader before ladies' windows by night, and yet courteous and not forward—fit material to be sobered by war and council into a successor of the Knight, his father.

A Yeoman, an archer, is their only follower—though this is remarked upon as unusual; and in him we see the private soldier—the bowman, with round "nut" head and tawny skin, who set at naught the charges of steel-clad knights—and also the man skilled in woodcraft, the Forester.



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So much for the army and the chivalry—the courtier being lacking to the picture except in the person of Chaucer himself, who is kept in the background throughout.

The Church, as has been said, claims about one-third of all the party, and has a mingling of good and bad—the dainty, coquettish Prioress, the poor Parson, and the Monk and Nuns being far better in all respects than the big Friar Hubert, the repulsive Summoner, and the yellow-haired Pardoner with his cynical hypocrisy. As for the Canon, who comes riding in haste to join the party at “Boghton under Blee,” just as the tale of St. Cecilia is ended, he seems hardly to belong to the Church party, despite his title—as he is only an alchemist, if we trust the Yeoman, who introduces him; and is likewise a swindler, if we believe that the “Canon Yeoman’s Tale” was really about his master, in spite of his weak disclaimer. The prologue to that tale, and the tale itself,

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should by no means be overlooked by the reader, since otherwise some excellent descriptive writing and a good story will be lost.

The professional group, the Clerk, Doctor, and Man of Law, are at least respectable, though none is attractive. The taciturn, thin Clerk, absorbed in study; the stingy, learned, sceptical Doctor; and the pompous, able Lawyer, have too little humanity about them to win friends. But the opposite fault is to be found with the business-men—the Merchant sitting high on his horse and looking prosperous; the generous white-bearded Franklin, who wished his son were like the young Squire; the burly, noisy Miller, "Robin," with his spade-shaped beard, his bagpipe and his sword; the old Reeve, skinny, quick-tempered, riding ever hindmost of the procession, where he may see and not be seen; and the prosperous tradesmen in their new clothes.

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These do not lack humanity; they are much too familiar, and far too easy-going. Chaucer takes the trouble to tell us that both the Miller and the Reeve were "churls," and he might have saved his time. The Cook, also, and the Shipman of the bark "Magdalen," are churls, and the first a drunken churl at that. The only "wight of low degree" whom we can heartily approve is the industrious, self-respecting Plowman, brother of the "poor Parson," and as virtuous as he.

Of the Wife of Bath we can hardly speak critically; she is so self-sufficient, shrewd, and courageous that one might be excused for taking her enormous hat, "broad as a buckler," her ten-pound handkerchief, and scarlet stockings as signals of danger, warranting instant flight. There is no timid femininity about the <sup>out</sup> gap-toothed Wife of Bath, and yet she is the masterful type of women who sometimes prove to be the tenderest to those in trouble.

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

If there is among the pilgrims no gracious type of woman, though Chaucer has proved in more than one place that he could describe gentle and noble womanhood, may it not have been that such women then were busy in their homes—as, in our own days, the same type find their earthly pilgrimages can be made nearer home, and to better advantage?

In turning from the delightful “*Canterbury Tales*” there is a sense of gratitude that the tooth of Time has spared this great treasure of our literature. Incomplete the poet left it, and even more incomplete it may have come to us; but, like some fragment of a Greek statue, nothing can replace it.

Mrs. Browning says : “He sent us a train of pilgrims, each with a distinct individuality apart from the pilgrimage, all the way from Southwark and the Tabard Inn, to Canterbury and Becket’s shrine: and their laughter comes never to an end,

## *The Pilgrims*

and their talk goes on with the stars, and all the railroads which may intersect the spoilt earth forever, cannot hush the 'tramp, tramp' of their horses' feet."

## CHAPTER XIII

### AFTER CHAUCER'S DEATH

LEAVING untold the rest of the tales of his body of pilgrims, the poet died on the twenty-fifth of October, 1400, as we know from the inscription that once was carved upon his monument in the Abbey; and this was copied, it is believed, from his tombstone, for the monument was not erected until 1556, when Nicholas Brigham, an admirer, replaced the earlier stone by a tomb of gray marble.

The second memorial to the poet has also suffered during the three hundred and fifty years of its existence, and its lettering, together with a full-length portrait of Chaucer, is nearly gone.

But Chaucer was the first literary celebrity to occupy a place in England's

## *After Chaucer's Death*

pantheon of fame, and as other poets were laid near him, the "Poets' Corner" was consecrated to men of letters.

How much was indicated by Chaucer's burial in the Abbey we cannot tell; but there is no doubt that before his death he had received the recognition that was his right. There are enough lines in his praise to prove that the writers of his own days knew him for a master. Another proof of his popularity is the large number of manuscripts that must have been in existence in his lifetime or not many years afterwards, since many yet remain.

To Occleve, an appreciative friend if not himself a great poet, we owe the portrait which has already been described. A copy of it is the frontispiece to this volume. Gower, a poet of higher rank than Occleve, showed his admiration for Chaucer by following his example in writing poems in English, rather than in Latin or French. Lydgate, a younger man than either Gower

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

or Chaucer, took pains to testify his admiration in more than one of his writings.

Indeed, Chaucer's range was so wide, and he was so excellent in the various styles he adopted, that it was hard not to be his follower unless a poet chose to adopt the older models set by the balladists or to write in the ruder form chosen by Langland. Little room for originality was left to the poets who survived; and it was not until new ways of thinking, new views of the world, had broadened men's outlook that there was room for the great Elizabethan poets.

Taine, in his "English Literature," finds that Chaucer himself was unable to escape entirely from the narrowing philosophy of the age, and blames that philosophy for the intolerable dulness of such productions as the "Boethius," the "Melibeus," and the "Parson's Tale." When Chaucer felt bound to be "improving," he was quite as tiresome as the dull preachers of his day;



## *After Chaucer's Death*

and it was only when the poet felt free to be amusing or delightful that he wrote with the full power of his genius.

Chaucer's successors and contemporaries did not seem to have his power of occasional escape into freedom. Gower and Occleve, Lydgate, and the lesser lights seldom wander from the set "morals" and "examples" that repel the modern reader. We have drawn a line between literature and the school-book or book of sermons, and prefer each unmixed, or at least properly labelled. The people of the Middle Ages were likely to divide all discourse into two great classes—the moral and the moral-less. The poet did not wish to be classed with the jesters, buffoons, street-singers, or wandering balladists, and so was likely to put into his poems much too large a dose of sermonizing.

Chaucer had been able, being a man of remarkable genius, to retain his high rank as a poet and yet to give himself unusual

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

freedom in subjects and in treatment. No poet, for years after his death, was capable of succeeding to Chaucer's place.

The three men already named were the ablest writers of their time except Langland, who was of a different order and wrote for another audience. By common consent Gower, the "moral Gower," as Chaucer called him, is the most important. We will speak briefly of Chaucer's influence upon these three writers, giving Gower the first place.

We know the two poets were friends, and have seen that during the second of Chaucer's absences from England in Italy Gower was one of two friends appointed to represent him. Gower, in an epilogue to his English poem, the "*Confessio Amantis*," spoke of Chaucer at some length, in a passage often quoted. But there is also an interesting story told in the prologue to that poem, for Gower says that he, while rowing on the Thames, met the

## *After Chaucer's Death*

barge of Richard II, and was invited aboard, and after some talk was requested by the king to produce some more poetical work, "to book some new thing in the way he was used." Though old and weakened by illness, Gower consented, and wrote the "Confessio," dedicating it to the king. The first edition of this poem in its epilogue represented Venus as giving to the poet a message to be delivered to Chaucer. The end of it reads thus:

"Thou shalt him tellen this message,  
That he, upon his later age,  
To set an end to all his work  
As he which is mine owen clerk,  
Do make his testament of love  
As thou hast done thy shrift above,  
So that my court it may record."

But in a later and revised edition the poem is dedicated to Henry, Duke of Lancaster, instead of Richard II, though the poem is stated to be written while Richard was still on the throne, in the sixteenth

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

year of his reign—that is, between June, 1392, and June, 1393.

Besides changing the dedication, Gower left out the reference to Chaucer; and some argue from this a quarrel—another of the wild suppositions from flimsy evidence. At all events, they were friends for some time; and since Gower was dignified, learned, and rich, we may assume that Chaucer was not such as Gower would disapprove as a friend or hesitate to follow as a leader in the fashion of writing poetry in English.

From another part of the epilogue already quoted we learn on Gower's authority that Chaucer's poems—his "ditties and his songès glad"—have filled the whole land. From Chaucer we get the term "the moral Gower," a description that will always exist; and we also may read a passage where two stories contained in the "*Confessio Amantis*" are cited as the sort of shocking incidents Chaucer

## *After Chaucer's Death*

thinks poets should not include in their verse, since poetry should not deal with what is revolting.

There is therefore plenty to show that in John Gower we know one of Chaucer's closest friends, and that this friend was a man of excellent character and held in high repute, though it is Professor Lounsbury's opinion that he never approached Chaucer in popularity, in poetical skill, or in true merit.

Lydgate should no doubt come next to Gower, but it will be enough to say that this "monk of Bury" was in poetry the scholar of Chaucer, and composed more than two hundred and fifty pieces of the greatest variety and of differing value. Some critics call his works rubbish; others say he has been "oftener abused than read," as Disraeli records in his "Aménities of Literature." We thank the literary monk for two references to Chaucer. He says that "this said poet, my master,

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

composed full many a fresh ditty, complaints, ballades, roundels, virelays"; and he also tells us that Chaucer never allowed himself to be worried by small faults or criticisms, but did his best in his work and let it go at that.

Disraeli also quotes from Warton, the early historian of English poetry, a statement showing that Lydgate was a veritable Jack-of-all-work in writing, composing verses for pageants, making up masques, or furnishing songs or cards for all holidays and festivals. That Coleridge and Gray admired Lydgate more than Gower is learned also from Disraeli's article in the book already quoted—one of that delightful series all lovers of English literature should possess.

Occleve (or Hoccleve) also is treated in another of Disraeli's essays, and opinions for and against him are weighed; but we must at all events remember with gratitude that he caused the portrait of Chau-

## *After Chaucer's Death*

cer to be handed down to us—the only others named by the authorities being a painting in the Bodleian Library and one in the British Museum. Possibly Occleve's is the original of all.

Only the special student need look beyond the three poets already named for early successors or followers of Chaucer. All who have studied the times agree that there was a long delay before there was any poetry comparable to his, and that it was in Scotland the English poet found his worthiest followers for many a long year after his voice was silent.

One advantage came from this. Chaucer's language became the main source of literary English. Had there been other poets to follow him closely in varying dialects his influence would have been lessened. But his English—that Southeast Midland dialect, the talk of the court, of London—was left to work its way alone, so far as literature went. You will find in

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

histories of literature how the bards of the North, the Scots, were led to follow the Father of English Poetry, and to learn from him the skill and graces he had learned partly from Petrarch, Dante, and Boccaccio. You will read something of Thomas the Rhymer, of Andrew of Wyntoun, especially of Robert Henryson, a monk or schoolmaster, and of James I of Scotland, the last two being professed followers and scholars of Chaucer.

Then you will see how Caxton, who set up his printing-press in Westminster, also printed his books in the common tongue of London—the same Midland dialect, and thus helped to make it the standard English. But here we need consider only these general facts, and remember how it is to Chaucer's poems that we owe the form of our language.

Lowell says that Chaucer's genius gave the language life, and showed its power. "In this sense," he writes, "it is hardly too



## *After Chaucer's Death*

much to say that Chaucer, like Dante, found his native tongue a dialect and left it a language. But it was not what he did with deliberate purpose of reform, it was his kindly and plastic genius that wrought this magic of renewal and inspiration. It was not the new words he introduced, but his way of using the old ones that surprised them into grace, ease, and dignity in their own despite."

But this question of language is incidental, after all. What kept Chaucer's poems alive and made them a continuing influence was something lying far deeper than language or choice of words. For the first time in English poetry we see real men and women, drawn so they do not lose their character and individuality, and so combined in action and happening as to give us a complete work of art. "It is his largeness of heart, his wide tolerance, which enables him to reflect man for us as none but Shakespeare has ever reflected

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

him; and to do this with a pathos, a shrewd sense, and kindly humor, a freshness and joyousness of feeling that even Shakespeare has not surpassed," is Green's verdict in his "History of the English People," a verdict that will perhaps surprise some readers by the comparison with Shakespeare.

The death of Chaucer preceded a stormy period in English letters, a time when poetry was hardly to find a hearing for many years, and then was to make up for long silence by the brilliance of the age of Elizabeth. Meanwhile, wherever there is still poetical life, the influence of Chaucer is to be traced, now in a quotation, now by the borrowing of a plot, and again in the use of metres he introduced or devised, or in a popular ballad that told in shorter form such a story as that of "Patient Griselda."

When Henry VII was firmly established on the throne, and the White and

## *After Chaucer's Death*

Red Roses were reconciled, the poets considered themselves as the successors to the men of the fourteenth century, and were glad to write in praise of the earlier masters. Here again it is impossible to quote the passages without treating the subject from a text-book standpoint.

Ward's "Chaucer" gives shortly an excellent sketch of the obligations of these writers to Chaucer, citing as examples Hawes, who wrote a chapter in praise of Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate; Barklay, whose "Ship of Fools" shows traces of an influence from the "Canterbury Tales"; Skelton, whose patron was likewise an editor of Chaucer's works; Heywood, who quoted or stole lines of Chaucer's; and Tottel, who included in a poetic miscellany "The Good Counsel of Chaucer."

Reaching the Elizabethans, there is found the same sort of evidence that Geoffrey Chaucer had not lost his hold upon either readers or writers. All speak of

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

him or show that his works are known. We shall find in the next chapter verses from Spenser, words of praise from Sir Philip Sidney, lines from Drayton, all singing the praises of the Father of English Poetry, while an examination of the works of the early dramatists will show that borrowings from the rich store of his works was quite a habit in the days of good Queen Bess.

Later in English history came a time when Chaucer was less thought of. The days of the civil war in England were in no way favorable to his fame. Though now and then is to be found a writer referring to him as the greatest of English poets, they are but following the fashion of preceding years. He was read to some extent, but it was by men of scholarly tastes, such as Milton, who made in a recently discovered commonplace book several extracts from Chaucer.

As time went on there arose the belief

## *After Chaucer's Death*

that, because of his unintelligible English, Chaucer was to be forgotten, and some men believed that in order that any work in literature should survive it must be put into Latin. Lord Bacon, much earlier, had been of the same opinion. Chaucer's "Troilus and Criseyde" was consequently published with a Latin translation on opposite pages. Then, too, many tried to modernize his language.

But here and there throughout England were readers of the old English poet, and by these men the lamp of admiration was kept alive, and this in spite of those who looked upon his verses as uncouth and rough because they had no idea how they should be read to bring out their music. And when the days of Pope and Dryden came to an end, when less artificial standards were adopted, the admiration and appreciation of Chaucer revived and increased.

To-day he is perhaps considered greater

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

than ever before. Professor Lounsbury, in his introduction to his "Studies in Chaucer," asserts that Chaucer had probably been more read during the twenty years from 1871 to 1891 (the latter being the date at which these studies appeared) than during the preceding two centuries. In England the Chaucer Society has done everything for the study and popularizing of his works, and editions of the poems or studies relating to the author are numerous enough to show that they appeal to a large and widening circle.

As we gradually learn more of the poet's life and personality, we inevitably are drawn to him and to his works, and soon find that he is a necessary link in the long chain of writers who have made for us that literature in which the mental life of mankind is preserved. We get rid of the temporary fashions or ideas that attach us for a time to writers who have only a limited range or purpose, and come more and

## *After Chaucer's Death*

more to hold in regard the great, broad-minded writers—among whom Chaucer is winning, if he has not already won his place.

## CHAPTER XIV

### ABOUT THE EDITING OF CHAUCER

WILLIAM CAXTON, the first English printer, and also the first to print any of Chaucer's works, was born more than twenty years after the poet's death; apprentice to a mercer, he left England shortly after receiving a legacy from his master, and went to the Netherlands, where he prospered in Bruges as a merchant. When nearly fifty Caxton visited Cologne, and there learned printing. Returning to Bruges, he produced the first book printed in English, "The Recuyell of the Histories of Troy," and two others.

At the age of fifty-five Caxton set up his press near Westminster Abbey, where he printed small pamphlets, certain writings of Lydgate's among others, and be-



## *His Editors*

fore long brought out the first edition of the "Canterbury Tales," a big folio edition of 748 pages. Chaucer's "Boethius" also appeared within Caxton's first three years in London, and Gower's "Confessio" was printed not long afterward, and then the "Canterbury Tales" was issued in a second, corrected edition.

A reprint of the Tales was issued also by Wynkyn de Worde, Caxton's apprentice and successor. But others had learned the art and mystery of printing, for within thirty-four years after Caxton's beginning four hundred books had come from English presses.

The first printing of Chaucer is not dated, but is believed to have been published about 1478. In 1484 Caxton had found the manuscript he had used was faulty, and had secured a better one for the second edition. From Caxton's press had come, besides the "Canterbury Tales," several other poems of Chaucer's; but it

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

was not until 1526, a century and a quarter after the poet's death, that any attempt was made to bring together his works, which was done by a printer named Pynson.

Next, in 1532, came an edition supervised by Thynne, Chief Clerk of the Kitchen to Henry VIII, who ransacked all the libraries of England to make the text as perfect as possible; but one of the most learned writers on Chaucer preferred Caxton's second issue.

Then other editions appeared in 1550 and 1561, many poems not belonging to Chaucer being added; and in 1598 appeared another with a life of Chaucer, and other helps to the reader. This, expanded, came out again in 1602, and then, as Professor Lounsbury says, "the text was to remain undisturbed for more than two hundred years."

One thing is to be noted, however, in an edition bearing the date 1721. Hith-

erto Chaucer had been printed always in the type known as black-letter, and this had made it certain that only scholars would dare read it; the Urry edition was put into ordinary type, despite the wails of certain antiquaries. As the years went on, various attempts were made to bring out a fitting edition, but none especially commendable was completed. Dr. Johnson at one time thought to undertake the work, and wrote out a scheme for it, but went no further. The poet Gray studied Chaucer's metre, and believed that ignorance of early English was to blame for the apparent difficulty in reading the poems musically.

But it was in 1775 that a capable editor at last appeared to take in hand the editing of Chaucer. This was Thomas Tyrwhitt, educated at Eton and Oxford, who died while curator of the British Museum in 1786.

He edited the "Canterbury Tales" only,

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

but did it so thoroughly that his version of the text has ever since been received as superior to all others, except for matters in which later knowledge has been acquired. Tyrwhitt had exquisite literary taste, and made Chaucer clear and intelligible so far as the learning of the time permitted.

But before Chaucer could be read musically and fully understood it was necessary to recover a fuller knowledge of the language he wrote; and this work was well done, especially by Gesenius, the German scholar, and Professor Child, of Harvard; and at the suggestion of the latter the Chaucer Society was founded in 1867. This society brought out a six-column edition of the "Canterbury Tales," and other most valuable publications, which have enormously stimulated study of the poet, and have put into the hands of readers excellent editions, well-punctuated, annotated, cleared of blunders, and

## *His Editors*

generally readable, though they have tried to guard against unnecessary changes, believing an unintelligible line often better than a doubtful correction.

The work is still going on, for Chaucer covers so wide a field that nearly every new fact we learn about the fourteenth century is likely to aid us in understanding some reference in his poems. Only by a close personal study of his poems can it be understood how many a difficulty has been cleared away for us, and what laborious hours have gone to the correction of a single small error. Indeed, it is worth while to read somewhat closely the history of Chaucer's texts, so that we may understand the debt we owe to the patient scholarship which is reconstructing for us the work done by our early poets and dramatists.

Certainly Chaucer would have been deeply grateful to all who try to make his text clear, as we know from at least

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

two passages he has written. One is a little poem addressed to his "scrivener," Adam. It is short enough to quote entire:

"Adam, scriven, if ever it thee befall  
Boece or Troilus for to writen new,  
Under thy long locks thou must have the scalle\*  
But† after my making thou write more true.  
So oft a day I must thy work renew,  
It to correct and eke to rub and scrape;  
And all is through thy negligence and rape.‡"

Of course this is playful, but it shows that mistakes were made and that Chaucer was not careless about them. The other passage occurs toward the end of "Troilus and Criseyde," and runs thus:

"And, for there is so great diversity  
In English, and in writing or our tongue,  
So pray I God that none miswritè thee,  
Nor thee mis-metre, for default of tongue;  
And read whereso thou be, or elles§ sung,  
That thou be understood, I God beseech."

\* Scald.    † Unless.    ‡ Haste.    § Else.

## *His Editors*

But Chaucer could not then know that, with the best wish to do him justice, we do not quite understand just how his poems are to be read in metre. There are two schools in regard to metre in poetry. One makes metre a matter of syllables, the other a matter of accenting. One thinks a line is not metrical if it cannot be brought under certain rules of scansion (with exceptions galore, by the way); the other school insists that any line is good in metre if it is good in musical reading. Edgar A. Poe has treated this subject very interestingly in his essay, "The Rationale of Verse"; but it is not to be denied that there are good authorities and good arguments on each side, and that in different languages different rules apply.

Good editions of Chaucer usually contain such directions in regard to his metre as will enable readers to find him musical, and those who intend to go deeply into the subject will have no difficulty in securing

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

reading matter in plenty to occupy all the leisure they care to give.

Lowell believes Chaucer "one of the best versifiers that ever made English trip and sing with a gayety that seems careless, but where every foot beats time to the tune of the thought," and we may surely rest satisfied with any method of reading that leaves the poet his music, and makes necessary no great violence to the laws of accenting and pronunciation.

In the manuscript days, when to produce a single copy of the Bible took so long that it required twenty scribes and a year's work to produce an edition of one hundred, the manuscript of a celebrated poem was a possession to be cherished. We are told that Froissart prepared for Richard II a presentation copy of essays which is thus described:

"It was illuminated and bound in silver-gilt velvet with studs of silver-gilt, and gold roses in the centre, with two great



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gold clasps richly wrought in the middle with golden rose-sprays." No wonder the gift greatly pleased the king—as we are told it did.

But though manuscripts were so valuable, copyists were as fallible then as now; and with fifty surviving manuscripts of the "Canterbury Tales" we cannot always find a single correct version of a puzzling passage. The copyists copied others' mistakes and introduced new ones. Ignorant editors made changes that were uncalled for and absurd, and to-day there remain more than a few passages that cannot be made sensible, and references to matters lost in the lumber-room of by-gone customs.

Still, we have enough of Chaucer's undoubted and genuine work in carefully edited texts to enable us to appreciate his genius fully, and may leave the disputed matters to the scholars engaged in untangling literary puzzles, only remember-

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

ing to be grateful for their labors in making our paths clear.

Nor is it only a clearing of the text that has helped us to know the poet. Much more important has been the work of separating from the genuine poems an enormous mass of verse that had been dumped at Chaucer's door by the rivalry of editors wishing to bring out the most complete editions of his works. Not only did these spurious poems affect the poet's reputation as a poet, but by careful examination of their text, biographers had gathered a lot of so-called "facts" about his life and character (or rather, inferences) that sorely injured the poet as a man.

To go over these in detail would defeat the very purpose of leaving them out in this account of the poet's life. But there is one story you will find referred to or told in full in all the older accounts of Chaucer. This refers to a supposed incident in his political career. We have been

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assured that Chaucer was involved in a civil commotion or political quarrel due to his favoring the election of Sir John Northampton. This candidate's defeat for the mayoralty of London in 1384 was followed by persecution of his supporters, the friends of John of Gaunt, and Chaucer was said to have fled to the continent. Returning, he was imprisoned, and released only when he consented to betray his friends.

All this story was based mainly on facts concocted from statements made in a long dialogue called "The Testament of Love," and was greatly elaborated in Godwin's life of Chaucer—Godwin being the father-in-law of Shelley, and his book appearing in 1803—a book so full of fanciful details that even the author's wife spoke of this defect, as Charles Lamb records.

But the story of the imprisonment was based on so flimsy a foundation that the

## *In the Days of Chaucer*

critics have utterly demolished the whole structure. Sir Nicholas Harris proved that Chaucer during his supposed exile was really in London, drawing his pensions in person; also that the poet was a member of Parliament when the story required him to be a prisoner in the Tower of London or elsewhere. "The Testament of Love" itself was attacked, and shown by two others, Collier in England and Hertzberg in Germany, to contain nearly conclusive proof that it was not Chaucer's, being different in style, language, and method; and also referring to its writer in the first person, Chaucer in the third; while it praised Chaucer, in terms that modest poet could never have used, for certain arguments the poet had taken from Boethius. So did the doughty critics rend this part of what Professor Lounsbury calls "the Chaucer legend"—that amazing web of fanciful falsehood time and ignorance have woven around him.

## *His Editors*

Other false or doubtful statements frequently met with are assertions that he was educated at Oxford (or Cambridge); that he declared he was born in London; that he read law in the Middle Temple and beat a friar in Fleet Street (a story that was greatly expanded by Chatterton); that he owned a house at Woodstock, or composed poems under some certain oak-tree, called "Chaucer's Oak." All these stories rest upon insufficient foundation. There may be some suggestions of truth in them, but if there is we cannot disentangle it from the falsity.

It will be seen, therefore, that the careful study of the text of his works is a matter of the greatest importance. Had the spurious "Testament of Love" remained among Chaucer's works, it would have made us fear the poet had proved himself a traitor and a turncoat—to say nothing of the injury done his reputation by a very stupid, long-winded companion

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to those other boresome works—the “*Melibeus*” and the “*Parson’s Tale*.”

There are still included under Chaucer’s name a number of pieces that may one day be excluded, for the study of both his life and his works is being busily carried on in England, Germany, and America, by scholars who are by their own labors making themselves and their successors more capable of judging between the false and the true. There are still masses of public records and private papers that may increase the knowledge of the doings of the men among whom Chaucer lived; and it is one of the pleasures of making his acquaintance that we may prepare ourselves to share the satisfaction coming from sifting truth out of hampering falsities.

We should all be glad to know the exact date of the poet’s birth, his marriage, the death of his wife; whether Thomas Chaucer was his son, whether his wife was really Philippa Roet, what became of his

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little son Lewis; the right dates for all of his poems; whether he met Petrarch in Italy; where he gained his education, where he was imprisoned in France, why he left his "Canterbury Tales" unfinished, which part of the "Romance of the Rose" is his own—and solutions to an endless number of minor puzzles that arise in reading the poems.

Yet, if one will compare the biographies of a century or more ago with so complete a story of the poet's life as is given in, for example, the "Dictionary of National Biography," we shall be encouraged to believe that progress toward the light will continue, and be confident that errors will be one by one detected.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE TESTIMONY OF THE POETS

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, in speaking of the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey, declares that the spirit of a poet is the only one that "survives for his fellow-mortals after his bones are in the dust. What other fame," he asks, "is worth aspiring for? Or, let me speak it more boldly, what other long-enduring fame can exist? We neither remember nor care anything for the past, except as the poet has made it intelligibly noble and sublime to our comprehension. The shades of the mighty have no substance; they flit ineffectually about the darkened stage, where they performed their momentary parts, save when the poet has thrown his own creative soul into them, and imparted a more vivid life than ever they were able to



## *Poets' Testimony*

manifest to mankind while they dwelt in the body. And therefore, though he cunningly disguises himself in their armor, their robes of state or kingly purple—it is not the statesman, the warrior or the monarch that survives, but the despised poet, whom they may have fed with their crumbs, and to whom they owe all that they now are or have—a name!”

Then passing on to the royal tombs in the Abbey, he declares that the helmet and war-saddle of Henry V are memorable more for Shakespeare's sake than for ~~the~~ victor's own.

Hawthorne is led by the crowded state of the Poets' Corner into a reflection that “all the literary people who really make an essential part of one's inner life might have ample elbow-room to sit down and quaff their draughts of Castaly round Chaucer's broad, horizontal tombstone.”

Whether the author of “The Scarlet Letter” would place Chaucer himself at

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the banquet of immortals he does not say; but his claim to rank with the greatest is hardly doubtful after it has been recognized by so many generations. We have spoken already of his contemporaries and their reverence for him, of Lydgate, who seldom wrote a long piece without tributes to the "chief poet of Britain"; of Occleve, who left us his portrait; of Gower, who recorded the wide-spread popularity of his work; of Froissart, who gave the flattery of imitation; of the Scottish bards, his devoted students and followers. But to these, having no room to quote, we must add merely the names of Ascham, the tutor of Queen Elizabeth; of Camden, the learned antiquary, both of whom called Chaucer the "English Homer"; and Eustace Deschamps, the French author, who spoke of that "grand translateur Geffroy Chaucier," and then pass abruptly on to men better known to us—to Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser, the Elizabethan poets.

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About 1579, a young collegian, who had been an actor, but had left the stage for the pulpit, issued a pamphlet attacking "Poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters, and such like Caterpillars of a Commonwealth." This little satire was dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney, and two years afterward Sidney wrote his "Apology for Poetry," which was not issued until 1595.

This work of Sidney's is really a defence of fiction in the widest sense, and is justly considered one of the notable books of our literature. Incidentally he gives us his idea of Chaucer in these words:

"Chaucer, undoubtedly, did excellently in his Troylus and Cressid; of whom truly I know not whether to marvel more either that he in that misty time could see so clearly or that we in this clear age walk so stumblingly after him. Yet had he great wants, fitte to be forgiven in so reverent antiquity."

There is not much enthusiasm here; but

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that is characteristic of Sidney's style, and somewhat due to his great respect for the classic authors. He always speaks composedly, and within bounds. Spenser is less restrained. He, in his "Shepherd's Calendar," does not scruple to give Chaucer the highest place in the often quoted passage where, celebrating Chaucer under the name "Tityrus" and meaning poets by "shepherds," he says:

" The god of shepherds, Tityrus, is dead,  
Who taught me, homely as I can, to make\*;  
He while he lived was the sovereign head  
Of shepherds all that been with love y-take;  
Well could he wail his woes, and lightly slake  
The flames which love within his heart had bred,  
And tell us merry tales to keep us wake  
The while our sheep about us safely fed.

Now dead he is, and lieth wrapt in lead;  
(Oh, why should Death on him such outrage show!)  
And all his passing skill with him is fled,  
The fame whereof doth daily greater grow.

\* Write poetry.

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But if on me some little drops would flow  
Of that the spring was in his learnèd head,  
I soon would learn these woods to wail my woe,  
And teach the trees their trickling tears to shed."

There are also references to Chaucer in others of Spenser's poems, as in the first stanza of "Colin Clout's Come Home Again," and in the "Faëry Queene," where he begs pardon of Chaucer for attempting to complete the "Squire's Tale," in the second canto of Book IV. It is in this passage that we find the famous lines:

"Dan Chaucer, well of English undefiled,  
On Fame's eternal bead-roll worthy to be filed."

"Dan," by the way, is derived from "domnus," mediæval for "dominus," and is the same word which the Spanish have retained in their title "Don," as "Don Quixote."

Spenser shows Chaucer's influence in so many places that there is not space to note them. His "Mother Hubbard's Tale" is

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written in direct imitation of his master's style, and copies even the tricks of phrasing. Indeed, we may regard Spenser as Chaucer's disciple and imitator, though he is in some qualities ranked higher.

Shakespeare also shows traces of Chaucer's influence, but in slight degree. His "Troilus and Cressida" has reminiscences of the earlier poem; his "Midsummer-Night's Dream" owes something to Chaucer's "Knight's Tale"; and "The Two Noble Kinsmen," which once had Shakespeare's name attached to it, is based upon the same story of "Palamon and Arcite"; but the great dramatist does not mention Chaucer by name, unless in the prologue to the last-named play—now not attributed to Shakespeare's sole authorship.

Pepys, in his famous diary, speaks of considering the purchase of a "Chaucer," and afterward tells of having his copy bound. Later references indicate that Pepys became an admirer of the poet, and

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Professor Lounsbury tells us that it was at the instance of Pepys that Dryden wrote his version of the character of the Parson, imitating the passage in the prologue to the "Canterbury Tales." The poet Drayton describes Chaucer as

" First of those that ever brake  
Into the Muses' treasure, and first spake  
In weighty numbers."

Dryden, while he confesses that Chaucer's "verse is not harmonious to us," yet imitated and modernized certain of his poems, in a way that seemed to make them more agreeable to his own time, though later critics have ridiculed the revisions once admired. Dryden wrote, "I seriously protest that no man ever had or can have a greater veneration for Chaucer than myself," but whether this veneration has led him to full appreciation of the poems is questioned by good critics, and must be decided by the best taste of

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readers who study both. At all events, a study of the Tales modernized by Dryden will be of the greatest help to the student in appreciating Chaucer's peculiar qualities, and may be recommended to teachers of literature as an improving exercise for students.

From Milton there is little to quote. "Il Penseroso" has the lines:

"Or call up him that left half-told  
The story of Cambuscan bold,  
Of Camball, and of Algarsife,  
And who had Canace to wife,  
That owned the virtuous ring and glass,  
And of the wondrous horse of brass  
On which the Tartar King did ride."

But these do little more than indicate that Chaucer was read by the Puritan poet. In the Latin poem, "Mansus," there is a line referring to Chaucer as Tityrus again:

"Quin et in has quondam pervenit Tityrus oras,"

but it shows only that Chaucer once wandered along the banks of the "silver



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Thames"; and except for a few mentions in his argumentative tracts, we have no other trace of Chaucer in Milton's works.

So exhaustively has Professor Lounsbury examined into the traces of "Chaucer in Literary History," in his essays of that name, that it would be absurd for us not to avail ourselves of his learning. Here can be given only the briefest suggestion of the facts he gives in fulness, and those who desire to go farther may consult his "Studies in Chaucer."

In the eighteenth century it became a fashion to imitate some of Chaucer's compositions, and this is traced to Dryden's essay in praise of the poet. Among the best-known imitators were Pope, Prior, and Gay, but little can be said in praise of any of the attempts, since, like most imitators, they found it easier to copy unimportant details than to reproduce the spirit or grace of the original. To bring the poet within the comprehension of readers of

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the time was a professed purpose of these versions, for it was thought that his language was so difficult as to be unintelligible except to scholars who had made it a special study. Hence we have Pope regarding Chaucer as obsolete, and forecasting the time when others as modern as Dryden would share the same fate, as we see in these lines from his "Essay on Criticism":

“ Now length of fame (our second life) is lost,  
And bare three-score is all even that can boast.  
Our sons their fathers' failing language see,  
And such as Chaucer is, shall Dryden be.”

It was a universal opinion that the language would vary until that of each time would become hardly readable to posterity; and so many wished to adopt some way of fixing the language—some standard of authority or usage. The same wish may now and then be heard from the lips of men to-day, though one would think that the five hundred years that have left

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Chaucer still readable might reassure them.

We can hardly sum up better the attempts of various writers to replace Chaucer by something else than in Professor Lounsbury's words: "By Dryden the gold of Chaucer had been turned into silver. The laborious alchemy of the eighteenth century went still farther and turned it into lead."

Though the nineteenth century approached Chaucer with a wish to explain rather than to modify, the attempt produced three more failures, those by Thurlow, Wordsworth, and Leigh Hunt, none of which is worth reading so long as the originals are obtainable. There was a project set on foot in 1841 to recast a great part of Chaucer's works by the co-operation of a number of literary lights, of whom Mrs. Browning (Miss Barrett, then) was one. Walter Savage Landor refused to assist, and in a letter declared "Chaucer was worth a dozen Spensers"; adding, "Par-

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don me, if I say I would rather see Chaucer quite alone in the dew of the morning, than with twenty clever gentlefolks about him, arranging his shoestrings and buttoning his doublet."

But the first volume—full of errors and absurdities—appeared, and was received in such a manner as to cause any thought of a second to be abandoned. For there were many who had studied Chaucer until they could understand what he lost in these attempts to make him over.

As knowledge increased by the labor of scholars, it was discovered that Chaucer had not been understood, had not been correctly read, had not been appreciated. A new school of poetry, the school that cared less for conventions, and looked more to nature than to classic models, found Chaucer anew. Southey said: "Chaucer stands in the first rank with Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton; and in variety of power Shakespeare is his only peer." Coleridge,

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Scott, Campbell, likewise praised him in terms indicating either their own admiration or the estimation in which he was held by scholars of their time. Mary Russell Mitford wrote: "Two or three of his 'Canterbury Tales' and some select passages from his other productions are worth all the age of Queen Anne, our Augustan age, as it has been called, ever produced."

Fortunately, readers of Chaucer are now so many that there is little need to quote authorities to establish his right place in our literature. The mystery and strangeness that once hung about his poems has been cleared away. He is read even by schoolboys and girls; he can be read, with little difficulty, by any who have learned his charm, and collections of his works in cheap and excellent editions can be found everywhere. If we quote a few more extracts in his praise, it is done to encourage readers by showing what they have to gain by learning to know Chaucer thoroughly.

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Tennyson, in his "Dream of Fair Women," begins by acknowledging his indebtedness to Chaucer in these stanzas:

" I read, before my eyelids dropped their shade,  
    '*The Legend of Good Women*,' long ago  
Sung by the morning star of song, who made  
    His music heard below.

Dan Chaucer, the first warbler, whose sweet breath  
    Preluded those melodious bursts that fill  
The spacious times of great Elizabeth  
    With sounds that echo still."

Then, from Lowell: "Chaucer seems to me to have been one of the most original of poets, as much so in respect of the world about us as Dante in respect of that which is within us. There had been nothing like him before, there has been nothing since. . . . He sets before us the world as it honestly appeared to Geoffrey Chaucer, and not a world as it seemed proper to certain people that it ought to appear." "If character may be divined from works, he was a good man, genial,

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sincere, hearty, temperate of mind. . . .

We love him more even than we admire."

From Longfellow:

"He is the poet of the dawn, who wrote  
The Canterbury Tales, and his old age  
Made beautiful with song; and as I read  
I hear the crowing of the cock, I hear the note  
Of lark and linnet, and from every page  
Rise odors of ploughed field or flowery mead."

From Scott's "Rokeby:":

"Oh, for that pencil, erst profuse  
Of chivalry's emblazoned hues,  
That traced of old, in Woodstock bower,  
The pageant of the Leaf and Flower,  
And bodied forth the tourney high  
Held for the hand of Emily,  
Then might I paint the tumult broad  
That to the crowded abbey flowed."

Mrs. Browning, in her "Book of the Poets," from which has already been taken a quotation about the "Canterbury Tales," thus speaks of their author: "He is a king, and inherits the earth, and ex-

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pands his great soul smilingly to embrace his great heritage. Nothing is too high for him to touch with a thought, nothing too low to dower with an affection. . . . not one of the Queen Anne's men measuring out tuneful breath upon their fingers did know the art of versification as the old rude Chaucer knew it." And she then explains that the word "rude" is used for the "picturesqueness of the epithet."

From William Hazlitt we might quote many passages; but one will show his general estimate: "The four greatest names in English poetry are almost the first four we come to—Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton. There are no others that can really be put into competition with these. . . . Chaucer excels as the poet of manners or real life; Spenser as the poet of romance; Shakespeare as the poet of nature (in the largest use of the term); and Milton as the poet of morality." "Chaucer was himself a noble, manly



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character, standing before his age and striving to advance it; a pleasant humorist, withal, who has not only handed down to us the living manners of his time, but . . . would make as hearty a companion as Mine Host of the Tabard."

Stedman, in a brief summary, says: "At the outset of English poetry, Chaucer's imagination is sane, clear-sighted, wholesome, with open-air feeling and truth to life," and in a recent poem, "Ye Tombe of ye Poet Chaucer," named from a placard he saw on the monument, Stedman depicts the quiet rest of the great poet during the ages, and ends with these stanzas:

"And now, when hawthorn is in flower,  
And throstles sing as once sang he,  
In this last age on pilgrimage  
Like mine, from lands that distant be,  
Come youths and maidens, summer free,  
Where shades of bards and warriors dwell,  
And say, 'The sire of minstrelsy  
Here slumbers well.'

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“ And say, ‘ While London’s Abbey stands,  
No less shall England’s strength endure!’  
Ay, though its old wall crumbling fall  
Shall last her song’s sweet overture;  
Some purling stream shall flow, be sure,  
From out the ivied heap, to tell  
That here the fount of English pure  
Long slumbered well.”

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE DWELLERS IN ARCADY

As we consider this land of poetry into which we have entered to make acquaintance with Geoffrey Chaucer, shall we not look about us to some of its more distant regions? For the men of his time Chaucer dwelt in old London on the Thames, ended his life there and lies buried somewhere in the shadow of the Abbey.

But for us he is one of the immortal citizens of that Arcadia the gateways to which are ever open at our wish, and he is one of those who have made it a land of perpetual delights. We may, if we choose, pass from our converse with him and his self-created company to those whom Chaucer found already in that enchanted realm when he entered there.

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We may draw near to the group that ever lingers around blind Homer and hear his songs of the days that were twenty centuries in the past long before Chaucer's boyish fingers were taught to shape the alphabet, and may see again the exploits of those heroes whose swords will never cease to flash in the flames of the Trojan citadel, or may wander with wise old Ulysses over land and sea, observing the manners and men of his little world, and then may rejoice with him when he stands at last with his back to his own portal and sends those avenging arrows among the thronged suitors.

Unless we are scholarly enough to be attracted to the obscure grove in which Hesiod is telling of old myths, and giving good advice to husbandmen, we shall be next drawn to where Virgil is echoing in his own polished words the accents of Homer, and shall here renew our friendship with him who exiled by fate came to La-

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tium and reared the city on the Seven Hills, losing by the way that poor Creüsa, and shall visit in his company the rising walls of Rome's future rival and victim, and mourn over poor Dido's funeral pyre, as the ships of her faithless lover sink below the horizon.

Leaving Virgil with the sweetness of his verse still in our memory, we shall not have far to go before finding ourselves in the company of the solemn Florentine to whom the Roman poet was alike teacher, guide and magician. And with Dante, we shall hardly remain in contact with the earth, but shall pass in visionary flight from the deepest depths of the *Inferno* to the higher circle of the seventh heaven.

But the vision shall be more than reality, and the divine Beatrice, the gracious Virgil, and the serene Dante shall come nearer to the soul than do the living men about us in our daily life. Dazed with the marvel of it all, wondering even when we

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but half understand, there is yet a mystery of unrest besetting us, and we have a sense of relief upon reaching firm earth again.

After the sojourn with the celestial companions of Dante, there is a touch of humanity even in the high-strung sonnets of Petrarch, and Laura is more approachable than the spiritual Beatrice in her saintly robes; indeed, except for the moments with the romantic Petrarch, we could hardly go on to the merry company that sits in a ring upon the lawn of an Italian villa listening to the perfect prose and easy verse of shrewd, delightful Boccaccio, as he retells with new graces the stories of a ruder time.

Not far away now is our starting point, where, within hearing of the Latins and Italians, and yet distinctly apart from them, we see Chaucer reading his musical lines, grave and gay by turns, to the richly dressed knights and ladies of King Edward's court. There is at times close re-

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semblance in his tone and manner to his Italian friends; and yet by a transition so sudden that we wonder afterward that there is no abruptness in the change, we hear a different note, and are conscious of listening to a voice that is English above all, so English that every drop of blood in our veins tingles with a response that, despite our awe, Dante never awakened; and we feel the vibration of chords Petrarch left untouched. We know Chaucer to be akin to us, and ourselves to be his children. We have now first heard the English accent, and shall know the twang of it upon the tongue of every bard hereafter, in whatever key they may choose to sing.

Here is another group, not far away, listening to the fairy tales of Edmund Spenser, tales made the more unreal and believable because of his affectation of an antique accent—an accent that never was on sea or land, but seems fitted to the regions of enchantment he has conjured up

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for us. We have passed many a singer and teller of tales, but we must pause for a moment at least with the courteous and learned Sidney, since he is a friend none would willingly lose, and his brave words in defence of poesy have won our gratitude and our allegiance. So we rest awhile in his haunt of shepherds and shepherdesses, though we know that these personages are not real, like those whom Chaucer has created for us. These of Sidney's are but dainty masqueraders, and their language is to our ears as unreal as themselves.

We find ourselves now in a crowded part of Arcadia. We can hardly give more than a happy glance of recognition to the many noble figures that are moving about us—to Chapman, who has caught something of Homer's bearing; to Raleigh, whose brief words are so delightful we grudge him to the outer world and wish him all Arcadian; to Kit Marlowe, a



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sturdy, independent figure, who at times has the tone and port of the greatest Arcadian of all; to Herrick, who seems to walk a little apart in a cosy happiness all his own; to Beaumont and Fletcher, arm-in-arm; to Ben Jonson, who wins a respect awarded to few of his companions.

But in an open space where none dare come within his radius is the Prince of the whole kingdom. No need has he of dignified bearing, of distance, of claim to deference. He is upon his own territory wherever his steps take him, and he wanders at will, consorting with high or low, the solemn or the gay, and yet reigns without self-consciousness the monarch of them all save Father Homer, the Divine Dante, and old Æschylus. And yet, though he speaks with the very tongue of inspiration upon every topic under the sun—the man remains unknown. He is the epitome of the drama, and speaks every man's thoughts but his own. One can approach

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nearer even to Dante, Homer, to Æschylus himself, than to this sprite, Shakespeare. He will jest with you, weep with you, pray with you, but he will not be intimate with any, nor tell his inmost thoughts save in puzzles none may read. Reading all men through and through, he remains impenetrable, wearing ever either the tragic or the comic mask. Striding in cothurnus or capering in buskin, he will have no partner by his side.

We do not know all Dante thinks, but we know his cast of mind. With Shakespeare we can no more predict than with his own Will-o'-the-Wisp. Over bog, over mire he leads us, and then vanishes, leaving us to flounder out. Yet such is the fascination of the man that we are ever ready at his call, and once near him fall under his spell until he chooses to set us free. Of only one thing are we sure. He is English—as English as Chaucer, and as much akin to us.

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Where shall we turn from this magician of the stage? We shall least feel his loss as he passes on, if we do reverence to the Puritan Poet—the mighty Milton, in whose sublimity and sweet serenity we shall rest after the mocking moods of his great forerunner.

It is as if after a day when nature has in her most capricious mood displayed all her power of storm and tempest, of gorgeous skies and soothing calm, we had passed into the calmness and peace of serene, untroubled sunlight. With less of force and beauty there is still the sense of sublimity. So in Milton we find a charm that even Shakespeare cannot give, a simple grandeur learned of the Hebrew prophets, for they, too, though more remote, are here, and have taught the secret of power to many later comers in the universal land of poesy.

Amid the innumerable hosts about us wherever we turn our eyes, are those with

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whom we should love to pause; and, once under their spell, it is hard to turn away. Were we French, we should by no means be drawn from broad-browed, twinkling-eyed Molière, but should believe him fit companion for any. Were we German, we should long since have been under the spell of Dr. Faustus, or ranging free wherever the wandering Goethe might choose to lead us. Spanish, we should hear for the hundredth time the woful comicalities of Don Quixote or rejoice in the homely wisdom of his squire Sancho. But these for another day. Now we will remember that we are of the English tongue, and shall make acquaintance only with our blood-kin.

Even for that, the time is too brief. Inspired by the words of their elder brothers, how many are speaking the true language of Arcadia! Here is big John Dryden, and here is little Alexander Pope, amazing us so with their assured skill that we won-

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der whether we are right in wishing they were a little less self-conscious and had more of the simplicity Chaucer taught us to admire. Here is Wordsworth, one moment inspired, the next beating time to mere prose. Here are Cowper, Gray, Keats, Shelley, ready to repay richly the time we give them, and each with a voice all his own. Here is Lord Byron, so careless of his great power, turning into poetry all he may say, yet offending as often as he pleases; and here we may hearken to the weird story of the Ancient Mariner or the music of Christabel until the voice of Coleridge dies away in mystical words of which none knows the meaning. There is relief in coming from these abstractions to the wholesome presence of the sturdy Sir Walter Scott. While with him we shall not regret for a moment that we are not elsewhere, but shall roam in the romantic hills of Scotland, breathing the fresh outdoor air or shall by the magic of his wand see

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again the pageantry of past ages come to life. Is it history? It is something truer than any history, it is great poetry, and truer than truth.

But it is not verse, and when Scott ceases to sing his ballads that stir us as Chevy Chase stirred Sidney, we must leave him among the prose-poets, with Bunyan, Defoe, Swift, with Fielding, Dickens, Thackeray, whom our age has persuaded to make stories rather than verses—and turn to the Peasant Poet of his own land though we retrace our steps that we may hear of the Cotter's Saturday Night, Tam O'Shanter's thrilling escape from the clutching hand of the witch, or the merry makings of All Hallowe'en.

We are too near our own day. The poets begin to assume to us a reality that has about it too much of earth to savor wholly of Arcadia. Not yet can we see Poe, the Brownings, Tennyson, Longfellow, Lowell, apart from the personality

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that embodied their spirits in the world of every day, and so not yet can they be to us true Arcadians, though in each there is that voice of the immortal land which assures us they will abide forever with the dwellers therein.

In our own new world, in America, there has been at least sufficient assurance that the heritage of poesy has not been withheld from us. As we have given our homage to the royal line of poets, and have been glad to acknowledge ourselves loyal subjects of this race of kings and prophets, we hope one day to find in their company some of our own countrymen who may be not unworthy to dwell with the poets and masters of the same mother-tongue.

But, as we have seen, the torch of poetic utterance passes from hand to hand down the ages, and the greatest torch-bearers do not disdain to receive one from another the light of learning, and sedulously to cherish

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the flame until it can be passed on for the enlightenment of later times.

From Homer to Virgil, Virgil to Dante, Dante to Petrarch, Petrarch to Chaucer came the light of other days; and from the hands of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton comes the glowing brightness that makes our homes beautiful, and warms the hearts of all who speak the English tongue.

While it may not lie in our power to add a ray to the brightness, we all may cherish the names and the memory of these benefactors of the race—the creators of that land where we may at will enter and hold converse with the greatest men of all times.

To none of these do we of the English-speaking races owe more than to the poet of our dawn—to Geoffrey Chaucer.

THE END



# APPENDIX

## CHIEF DATES IN CHAUCER'S LIFE

DATE	CHAUCER	OTHER EVENTS	WRITINGS
1340-6	Birth of Chaucer.	Battles of Neville's Cross and Cr�cy. Siege of Calais. The Black Death.	
1348	Death of Robert Chaucer (grandfather).		
1350		Founding of Order of the Garter.	
1352		Marriage of Lionel to Elizabeth de Burgh.	
1354-5		War with France and with Scots. Battle of Poitiers.	
1356			
1357	Chaucer a page to Elizabeth de Burgh.		
1358		The French "Jacquerie."	
1359	Chaucer a soldier.	Invasion of France.	"Romaunt of the Rose," "Chaucer's A. B. C." (both before 1369).
1360	Captured and ransomed.		
1361	Chaucer enters the king's household.		
1362		Langland's "Piers Plowman." Death of Elizabeth de Burgh.	
		English used in legal pleadings.	
1364		Building of Windsor Castle.	
1365	"Period of French Influence."	Birth of Richard II.	
1366	Esquire to the king. Marriage to Philippa. Philippa pensioned.		
	Death of his father.		
1367	Life pension granted.	Founding of the Kremlin, Moscow.	
	Remarriage of his mother.	Black Prince's campaign in Spain.	

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DATE	CHAUCEER	OTHER EVENTS	WRITINGS
1369	Chaucer in second French expedition.	Death of Blanche and of Queen Philippa. Wycliffe. Birth of John Huss.	"Book of the Duchess."
1370	Diplomatic journeys.		"Complaint unto Pity."
1371		The Charter House built.	
1372-3	Chaucer in Italy.	Winchester School founded.	Part of "Clerk's Tale" and "Palamon and Arcite."
1374	Period of "Italian Influence." Comptroller of Customs. Leased Aldgate house. Grant of wine.	Tournament at Smithfield.	"Complaint to his Lady."
1375-6	Becomes guardian to one Staplegate. On secret service abroad.	French provinces lost. Death of Black Prince. "The Bruce" by Barbour.	
1377	Missions to Flanders and to France.	Death of Edward III.	
1378	Missions to France and Lombardy.	Accession Richard II.	"Boethius" translated.
1379			"Troilus and Criseyde."
1380	More serious writing begins. Chaumpaigne affair.	Birth of Thomas à Kempis. Foreign monks expelled.	"Complaint of Mars."
1381	His son Lewis born.	Wat Tyler's rebellion.	"Boethius" finished.
1382	Comptroller "Petty Customs."	Wycliffe Bible finished.	"Parliament of Fowls."
1384		Marriage Richard II. Death of Wycliffe.	"House of Fame."
1385	Gave up Aldgate house. Allowed a deputy to assist him.	Richard II burns Edinburgh.	"Legend of Good Women."
1386	Lived at Greenwich. Knight of Shire for Kent, and sits in Parliament. Testifies in Scrope and Grosvenor trial. Loses his offices.	Battle of Sempach.	
1387	Death of his wife.	Richard II returns to London.	Begins the "Canterbury Tales."
1388	Pledges pensions.  Period of "Mature Power."	Insurrection against Richard. The Barons seize Tower of London. Battle of "Chevy Chase."	"Canterbury Tales."  (Nuns' Tale and Man of Law's Tale existed before in some form; also part of Knight's Tale, probably.)
1389	Clerk of works at Winchester.	Birth of Henry V. Richard II regains power.	

# Appendix

DATE	CHAUCEUR	OTHER EVENTS	WRITINGS
1390	Repairing banks of Thames. Twice robbed. Made forester.	Tournament.	
1391	Loses positions as clerk.		"Treatise on Astrolabe."
1393			"Envoy to Scogan."
1394	Pension granted.	Death of Queen Anne.	
1396		Richard II marries Isabel.	"Envoy to Bukton."
1398	Sole forester. Sued for debt. Grant of wine.	Richard abdicates. Shakespeare's "Richard II" begins its action here.	
1399	Leases a house at Westminster. Receives new pensions.	Henry IV on throne.	"Complaint to his Purse."
1400	Death of Chaucer.	Death of Richard II. Birth of John Gutenberg.	
1401	Death of Froissart.	Persecution of Wycliffites.	

## *Appendix*

### ENGLISH LITERATURE

*From the Norman Conquest to Beginning of  
Printing in England.*

#### 1066-1200.

The Saxon Chronicle, by the Monks of Peterborough.

Fragments—such as “Canute’s Song,” by Thomas of Ely; the “Prophecy of Here,” the “Hymn of St. Godric.”

#### 1200-1300.

Layamon’s “Brut”—The Ormulum Chronicles in verse—Legend of St. Catherine—Homily of St. Edmund—Address of the Soul to the Body—The “Owle and the Nightingale,” Ballad on the Battle of Lewes—English Romances: “Havelok,” “King Horn,” “King Alexander,” “Richard I,” “Guy of Warwick,” Life of St. Brandon—Martyrdom of à Becket.

#### 1300-1400.

Chronicles, Robert of Gloucester, Robert of Brunne; Popular Ballads, “Robin Hood,” “Willy Grice” “Summer is i-cumen in”—Poems of Lawrence Minot—Barbour’s “Bruce”—Langland’s “Vision de Piers Plowman”—Gower—Froissart’s Chronicles—Chaucer—Wickliffe.

ITALIAN AUTHORS: Dante, 1265-1321; Petrarch, 1304-1374; Boccaccio, 1313-1375.

## *Appendix*

### A BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY

THE GLOBE CHAUCER. Macmillan & Co., 1903. Complete, with life, introductions, notes, glossary.

THE STUDENT'S CHAUCER, Oxford Press, 1897. Complete, with life, an introduction, glossary. Either of these is cheap and good, the first being more recent and having more helps to the reader. If a more expensive edition is wanted, buy Skeat's or Morris's six-volume editions.

THE CANTERBURY TALES, 2 vols. Edited by Pollard.

THE PROLOGUE, KNIGHT'S TALE, and NUNS' PRIEST'S TALE, in the Riverside Literature Series, for young readers, in one volume, bound in linen, 40 cents.

THE PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY TALES, THE KNIGHTES TALE, THE NONNES PRESTES TALE. Edited in Critical Text, with Grammatical Introduction (being an Elementary Grammar of Middle English), Notes and Glossary, by Mark H. Liddell. Macmillan & Co.

SELECTIONS FROM CHAUCER'S CANTERBURY TALES. Edited, with Introduction, Notes and Glossary, by Hiram Corson, Professor in Cornell University. Macmillan & Co.

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THE MINOR POEMS, edited by Skeat, Oxford Press.

RIVERSIDE CHAUCER, 3 vols., edited by Professors Child, Lowell and Norton. Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

### BOOKS ABOUT CHAUCER

STUDIES IN CHAUCER, Professor Thomas R. Lounsbury. 3 vols. Harper & Bros. A complete and exhaustive critical study of the life and the writings, with citation of references. Very full and good on all doubtful questions, and written in most readable style.

MY STUDY WINDOWS. Lowell. Containing a charming essay on Chaucer. Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

✓ CHAUCER'S ENGLAND Matthew Browne 2 vols. A study of the times of the poet. Illustrated with a few old cuts. A good picture of the England of Edward III. Hurst and Blackett (1869).

✓ MEDIEVAL ENGLAND. Bateson. G. P. Putnam's Sons (1904).

DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY, "Chaucer." Macmillan & Co.

CHAUCER PRIMER. Pollard.

LIFE, in English Men of Letters Series, by Ward.

SOCIAL ENGLAND. Traill. (Vol. II.)

GREEN'S HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH PEOPLE.

## *Appendix*

CASTLE LIFE IN THE MIDDLE AGES. Blashfield.  
Scribner's Magazine, Vol. V. See also "The  
Man at Arms," Vol. III. ✓

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND. Wake-  
man. Rivingtons (1899).

ENGLISH LITERATURE. Taine.

AMENITIES OF LITERATURE. Disraeli.

PHRA, THE PHENICIAN. Arnold. Contains  
a vivid picture of life under Edward III.

THE RICHES OF CHAUCER. Charles Cowden  
Clarke. An expurgated selection of the  
poems, with a life of Chaucer full of statements  
now discredited.

CABINET PICTURES OF ENGLISH LIFE, "Chau-  
cer," Saunders, 1845. I have not examined  
this book, but find it mentioned.

✧ LIBRARY OF LITERARY CRITICISM, "Chaucer"—  
Moulton Publishing Co.

Publications of THE CHAUCER SOCIETY. Be-  
sides these may be mentioned Ten Brink's  
scholarly studies on Chaucer (Henry Holt  
& Co.), Tyrwhitt's edition of the works,  
with notes and glossary (Appleton), the  
Bohn edition, and a cheap edition published  
by T. Y. Crowell, in one volume.

The student who will buy the "Globe Chau-  
cer" will have enough to begin with, and by add-  
ing to this Professor Lounsbury's "Studies in  
Chaucer," he will be able to make a thorough  
study of the poet and his works.

## *Appendix*

### ROUTE OF THE CANTERBURY PILGRIMS

Few points can be certainly fixed, but the following route includes the points mentioned by Chaucer.

From the Tabard Inn (some call it Talbot Inn) in High Street, Southwark, of which until 1875 there were traces, they rode out southeasterly, and upon reaching the "Watering of St Thomas" (mentioned in line 826 of the Prologue to the Tales) the Host drew up and proposed that the telling of tales should begin. Possibly this was the old site of St. Thomas's Hospital, where now stands the Southeastern Railway.

No place is named thereafter until they are in sight of Deptford ("Depeford") and Greenwich, as mentioned in the Prologue to the Reeve's Tale. (Distance, 5 miles.) It was half-past seven in the morning ("half-way prime"). Thence, passing either near Woolwich and Plumstead, or by way of Greenwich Park, over Black Heath, Shooter's Hill, and Wellen to Grayford, they came to Dartford (16 miles), where many pilgrims were accustomed to stay over night; but Chaucer's party may have ridden on by Gravesend, where is Falstaff's Gad's Hill, and Dickens's home, then possibly by Pett Street, Chalk Street, Petticoat Lane, Hingham and Stroud, they reach the town of Rochester (30 miles), the next place mentioned. The Prologue to the Monk's Tale, line 3116



## *Appendix*

says. "Lo, Rochester stands here fast-by." Rochester was another usual place for breaking the journey; but these pilgrims may have gone on, by Shilowham, Marestreet and Keystreet, to halt at Sitting-bourne (41 miles), which the antiquary Camden notes as "a place well stored with inns." The Prologue to the Wife's Tale mentions "Sidingborne" as yet some distance ahead.

By Radfield and Green Street the road next reaches Faversham, and then we come to the next town named by Chaucer, Boughton-under-Blean ("Boughton under Blee") (50 miles). Here the Canon and his Yeoman overtook them, as is told in the opening lines of the Canon Yeoman's Prologue (line 556). After the Yeoman's story, the Manciple's Prologue refers to "a little town which that y-cleped is Bob-up-and-Down, under the Blee in Canterbury way." This has not been identified. The "Globe Chaucer" suggests Harbledown, or "Up and Down" ("Camden's Britannia" gives "Underdown"), a field in Thannington parish, as the place meant; and says "the Blee" is Blean forest.

The road hence to Canterbury might pass through Marbledown, St. Dunstan's Street, and Westgate to the Cathedral and the shrine—that bejewelled structure from which Henry VIII. carried such enormous treasure.

Between Rochester and Canterbury pilgrims sometimes halted at Ospringe, where traces of an old "Pilgrim House" still exist, as mentioned in the "Globe Chaucer" (1903).

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The reader is again cautioned that, except for the places Chaucer names, the route is uncertain, for five centuries make great changes. Yet the ancient Watling Street ran from London to Canterbury on its way to Dover, and was no doubt built with all the permanence of the Roman military roads, and as directly; so the route was likely to follow its general line at least.

The whole journey was about fifty-six miles, and it is thought Chaucer meant his party to be four days in the pilgrimage, though this was not rapid travelling.

---

### DOUBTFUL OR SPURIOUS POEMS

The following poems long attributed to Chaucer are now considered to be by other authors:

Merciless Beauty.—*Doubtful*.

Orison to the Holy Virgin.—*Doubtful*.

The Former Age.—*Doubtful*.

Testament and Complaint of Cressida.

A Goodly Ballade of Chaucer.

The Flower of Courtesy, with a ballade.

La Belle Dame Sans Mercy.

The Assembly of Ladies.

The Complaint of the Black Knight (or, of a Lover's Life).

A Praise of Woman.

The Testament of Love.

The Lamentation of Mary Magdalen.

The Remedy of Love.

## *Appendix*

The Letter of Cupid.

A Ballade in Commendation of Our Lady.

The Cuckoo and the Nightingale.

"Go forth, king, rule thee by Sapience." (No title.)

"Consider well every circumstance." (No title.)

Eight Goodly Questions with their Answers.

To the King's Most Noble Grace.

"When faith faileth in priestes' saws." (No title.)

"It falleth for a gentleman." (No title.)

"It cometh by kind of gentle blood." (No title.)

The Plowman's Tale.

Balade de Bon Consail.

A Proverb against Covetise and Negligence.

Against Women Unconstant.

In Dispraise of Women for their Doubleness.

The Craft of Lovers.

"Of their nature they greatly then delight."

The Ten Commandments of Love.

The Nine Ladies Worthy.

"Alone walking." (No title.)

"In the Season of Feverere." (First line.)

"O merciful and O merciabile." (First line.)

"Son of Priamus, gentle Paris of Troy." (First line.)

"I have a lady whereso she be." (First line.)

"O mossy Quince, hanging by your stalk." (First line.)

"Look well about, ye that Lovers be." (First line.)

"In Womanhead as authors all write." (First line.)

## *Appendix*

The Court of Love.

Chaucer's Dream.

The Flower and the Leaf.

Jacke Upland.

The Tale of Gamelin.

The Merry Adventures of the Pardoner and  
Tapster.

The Merchant's Second Tale.

"The world so wild, the air so remunable."

"The more I go the farther I am behind."

Prosperity.

Leaulte Vault Richesse.

An Amorous Complaint made at Windsor.

Some critics also doubt whether the Romance of the Rose is the translation made by Chaucer. Skeat admits only the first part. For a discussion of the whole subject see Lounsbury's "Studies," and a note in the preface to the "Globe Chaucer."

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